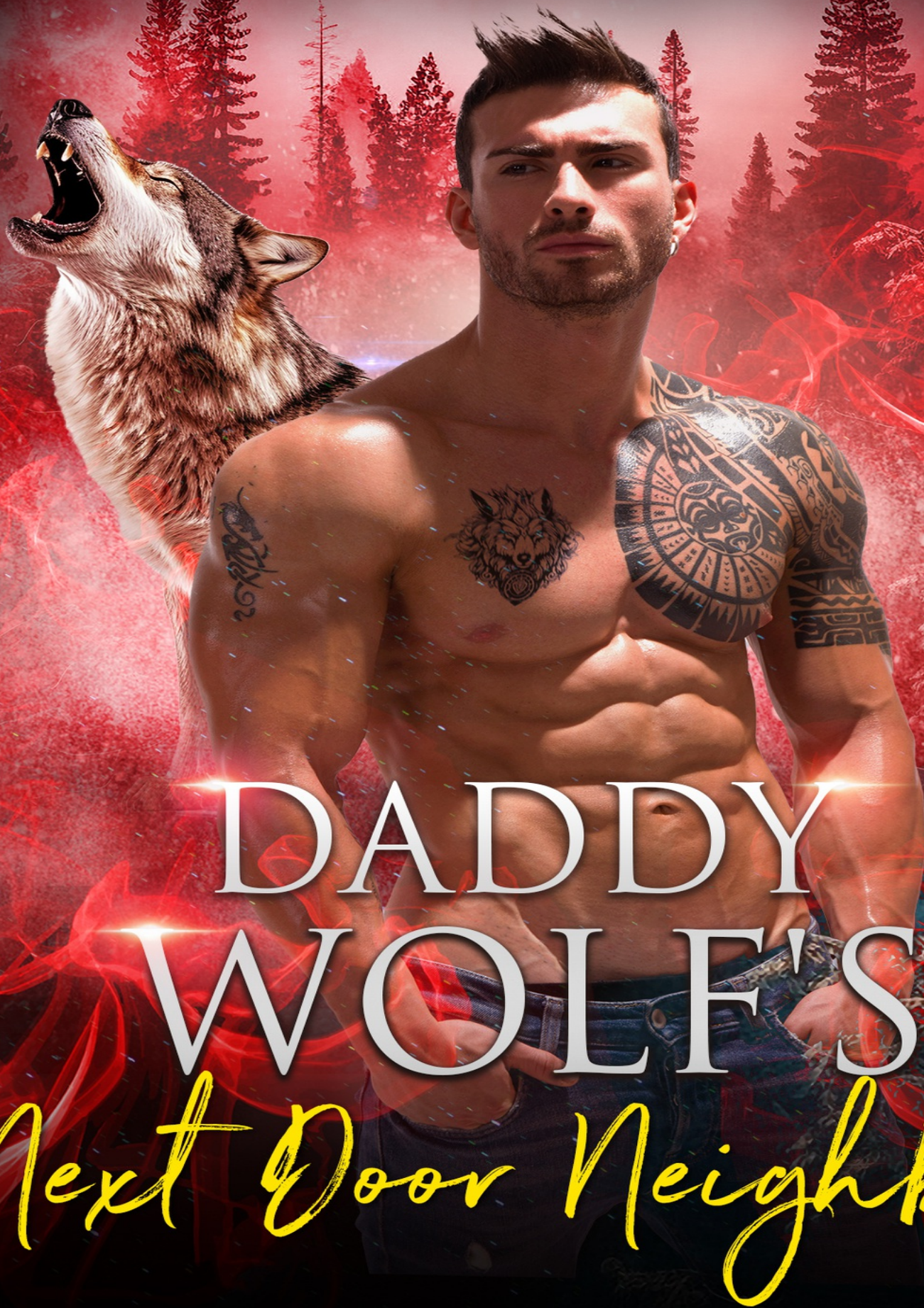


PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY
WOLF'S

Next Door Neighbor

SERENA MEADOWS

DADDY WOLF'S NEXT DOOR
NEIGHBOR

(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES)



SERENA MEADOWS

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CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Epilogue](#)

PROLOGUE



Noah picked up the big wooden spoon and lifted the lid off the pot on the stove, releasing a fragrant burst of steam, hoping the stew tasted as good as it smelled. After giving it a good stir, he scooped up a spoonful of his creation and took a little bite, then a second bigger one, deciding that it was one of his better attempts at dinner, and they'd eat it. Looking up at the clock, he let out a long sigh, not sure he had the energy to go looking for Connor again, but after shoving the bread into the oven, he turned off the stew and headed out the back door.

Crossing the yard, he headed for the trail leading away from the house to the stream, not even noticing how the late evening light played through the trees or the creatures around him preparing for nighttime. He had only one purpose in mind, catching his wayward son in one of the few places he wasn't allowed to go on the ranch, something that had become routine over the last week. It bothered him that his normally obedient son had suddenly become a rule breaker and he wasn't sure what to do about it, especially since in some ways he couldn't blame the boy.

Life hadn't been easy for either of them since their housekeeper, Maxine, had to leave. He was stretched too thin, and couldn't be both mother and father while trying to run the ranch, and the strain was beginning to show on both of them. But he couldn't let Connor get away with disobeying such an important rule, not when it was for his own safety. He knew that he'd have to punish him, which he didn't enjoy any more than his son did. With a sigh of resignation, he left the trail when he heard Connor's voice, wondering if his

son always talked to himself as he wound his way through the trees.

When he heard the gurgle of water over rocks, he paused behind a tree and then sprang out, “Connor, you’re late for dinner again,” he barked, making his son jump. “And you know that you’re not supposed to be down here by yourself.”

To his left, there was a scream followed by a big splash, but he was too focused on his son to pay attention until a very feminine voice broke through the haze of anger, “You huge jerk, you scared me,” she said. “What the hell are you doing jumping out of the trees like that?”

He was forced to turn away from Connor, but instantly wished he hadn’t when his vision was filled with the sight of a dripping woman, her white shirt turned completely transparent, revealing the lace bra underneath. When he finally managed to drag his eyes away from her breasts, her eyes were flashing with anger, and he involuntarily took a step back, a bit ashamed he’d been caught staring. Taking a deep breath, shoving the sudden wave of desire away, he ran his hands through his hair, then after a quick glance over at Connor, who was watching him closely, he looked back over at the women.

“I was trying to teach my son a lesson about how dangerous it is for him to be down here by himself,” he said. “And you helped me prove my point quite well.”

“You’re Connor’s father?” the woman asked, her eyes sizing him up before she turned and started for the other bank. “I should have known.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, annoyance replacing the desire to his relief. “How long have you been talking to my son?”

The woman turned to face him from the opposite bank, “Long enough,” she said, then turned to Connor. “I’d better get going, I don’t want to be late getting back. It was nice talking to you, Connor.”

“Bye, Hailey,” Connor said, a shy smile on his face. “I don’t think I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“That’s okay, I understand,” Hailey said, smiling back at Connor, then giving him a dirty look. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other again; Prospect is a small town.”

CHAPTER 1



NOAH

Noah was still watching the spot where Hailey disappeared into the trees, his mouth hanging open, body tingling with attraction, when he realized that Connor was gone. Pushing away both the desire and the feeling that he'd seen the woman somewhere before, he quickly pulled himself together and started down the trail after his son, trying to find the anger that had fueled his trip down to the stream only a few minutes before. There was very little fire left, and when he caught up with Connor around a bend in the trail, the guilty look on his son's face put even that out.

"I'm sorry, Dad, I know I shouldn't have been down by the stream," Connor said, staring at the ground. "It's just.....well.....I saw Hailey riding over there the other day, and I got curious. No one from the Gordon ranch ever comes close to our property, so I thought I'd better investigate. But she's really nice, not like the rest of them. She's a teacher, she's going to get a job at my school.....or one here in town, but I'm hoping it will be mine."

It was obvious that his son had a little crush, and he couldn't blame him if he was completely honest with himself, but he couldn't let him off the hook so easily. "Is this where you've been disappearing every day after camp?" he asked. "You know how dangerous it is to talk to strangers, Connor, and that stream may look calm, but you could still drown in a few inches of water."

Connor sighed, "I know all that, and I was really careful. I didn't get close to the water, and Hailey stayed on the other side of the stream the entire time," he said. "I'm not a baby anymore, Dad, I know the difference between a bad stranger and a good one."

“Oh, I see, at the ripe old age of seven, you’ve got it all figured out,” he said, then shook his head. “Look son, you may think you know it all, but you don’t, not even close. Just because Hailey is nice and pretty, that doesn’t make her safe. We don’t know anything about her. She might even be on Gordon’s property illegally. The next time you see a stranger that close to our land, I want you to come and get me or one of the other hands.”

“But Hailey’s not a bad guy, Dad, I can tell,” Connor protested. “If you’d just talk to her, you’d see.....”

His words died away when he saw the look on Noah’s face, “I’m sorry, Dad, I guess you might be right,” he said with a sigh. “It was just nice to have someone to talk to. You’re always so busy, I won’t go down there again, I promise.”

Grabbing his son, he lifted him up into his arms even though he was a bit too big, “I’m sorry, Connor, I know it’s been hard since Maxine left,” he said, giving him a hug. “I’ll try to do better, I promise, but we have to work together to make this work, and you following the rules is part of that.”

Connor looked up at him, “I’ll try, I promise,” he said. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too,” he said, giving him another hug before setting him on his feet. “Now let’s get home and have dinner, I’m starving.”

Hands washed, their plates full of food, they sat down to dinner together only a few minutes later. “Hey, this is pretty good,” Connor said after his first bite. “Did you make it?”

“Yes, I did,” he said, a little proud. “Your old dad is getting better at this cooking thing.”

Connor took a couple more bites, then looked over at him, “I still miss Maxine,” he said. “I wish she could have stayed with us.”

“I know, son, but her mother needs her. A broken hip is a big deal for a woman her age,” he said. “You know how important family is to her, she didn’t want to go any more than we wanted her to go.”

“We’re her family, too,” Connor said, a stubborn look on his face. “She told me that, but she left, just like my mother.”

“Oh, son, Maxine didn’t abandon us, she just had to go take care of her mother for a few months,” he said, then forced himself to smile. “I have an idea. After dinner, let’s give her a call. It won’t be as good as having her here, but it might help.”

Connor perked up and started eating again, but after a few minutes, he put down his fork and looked over at him. “Dad, there was something I wanted to

ask you,” he said, then paused. “I know you’ll probably say no, but I was hoping I could skip the meeting this Saturday. One of the guys from day camp is having a sleepover on Friday night, and he invited me.”

“You want to miss the meeting?” he asked, a bit surprised. “I thought you loved going to the club meetings, you used to look forward to them all week.”

“It’s not that fun anymore,” Connor said, shrugging. “I’m always the oldest one there. All the little kids want me to play with them or they follow me around, and I think I’m getting too old for it.”

He didn’t know what to say, hadn’t pictured the day his son was too old to play with the other kids at the meeting, but as he thought about it, he realized that Connor was right. Most of the kids that came with their single fathers to the meetings were younger than his son, and it hit him that it had been four years since he’d founded the club. Wondering where the time had gone, he thought about his answer, then realized that forcing Connor to go would only make him dislike it more.

“I’m sorry that we’ll miss out on that time together, but if you really want to go to the sleepover, then it’s okay with me,” he said, and the smile that spread across Connor’s face almost made up for his disappointment. “But I want to talk to the boy’s mother or father before I drop you off.”

“I can go?” Connor asked, vibrating with excitement, then began to do a wiggle dance in his chair. “I can go, I can go. I better go start packing.”

Hailey

Hailey rode away from Noah Russel, her heart pounding, goosebumps breaking out on her skin, her cheeks pink with embarrassment, but she refused to let it show. Hands shaking, she smoothed the wet hair away from her face and gave her horse a gentle kick in the flanks to get her moving, desperate to put some distance between them. Once the trail took her into the deep shade of the trees, the desire that had been thundering through her body began to fade, leaving her freezing in the breeze that cut through her wet clothing.

Giving her mare another kick in the flanks, she headed for the barn, wondering what her fourteen-year-old self would think about her meeting with Noah, and felt the color beginning to rise in her cheeks again. The last time they’d met, she’d been splashing around in the water too, only that time

it hadn't been a shallow stream, and she'd nearly drowned before Noah had plucked her out of the swollen river. He'd been her knight in shining armor, and for years, she'd fantasized about growing up and marrying him, had devised entire lifetimes with him, the house they'd have, the kids running around in the yard.

He'd faded from her mind over the years as real boyfriends took his place, and she'd been sure that her little crush had extinguished itself, but the way her heart was pounding right then told her something else. But who could blame her? Noah Russel was even more handsome than he'd been at twenty, with his green eyes and dark wavy hair. Any girl would swoon if he suddenly appeared out of nowhere like he had.

"Ms. Gordon, your father wants to see you right away," Tommy, one of the grooms, called, interrupting her thoughts and making her jump. "He called over a half an hour ago, you'd better hurry."

She was surprised to find herself back at the barn, but gladly handed over the mare. The thought of hot shower and dry clothes made her sigh with anticipation. "I'd better go change first," she said, slipping down out of the saddle. "I had a little mishap at the stream."

Tommy's face turned a bright shade of scarlet, "Umm..... your father said he wants to see you right away," he said, his eyes darting to her chest, then back to her face. "Do you want to borrow my jacket?"

"That's sweet, but I'll be okay," she said. "I'll just slip up to my room and grab a dry shirt, my dad will never know."

When she opened the front door, she could hear her father shouting from the back of the house and winced. Never the kindest of men, he was impossible to please when he was angry. "I don't know why I can't leave for a few days and expect that things will get done," he yelled. "Why wasn't Hailey informed of the plans, and where the hell is she now? Can't you people keep track of one woman?"

She heard something heavy hit the wall, a mumbled apology from Kevin, their butler, then another crash, and she knew she wasn't going up to her room. Pulling the wet shirt away from her chest, hoping it wasn't as transparent as it had been when she fell in the creek, she took a deep breath and headed for her father's study. He was pacing back and forth across the room when she stepped through the door but paused when he saw her, then stomped over to his desk and sat down.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded. "You knew I was coming

home today. You should have been here to greet me. Instead, I have to track you down like you own the place instead of me.”

“I’m sorry, I was out riding……” she started to explain, but her father cut her off.

“We have things to discuss,” he said, then pointed to the chair across from him. “Sit down.”

“I really shouldn’t, I’m all wet,” she said, suddenly alarmed. “I need to go change, or I’ll ruin the chair.”

“I don’t have time for you to go change; this has to be dealt with right now,” her father said, looking her over. “You should be ashamed to be seen that way. You’re not a child anymore, Hailey, you could act a bit more ladylike.”

She opened her mouth to defend herself, then changed her mind, afraid that if she mentioned Noah, it would send her father into one of his tirades. Instead, she sat down with a thud, hoping that her father would calm down if she kept her mouth shut. Her father kept her waiting for several long minutes as he shifted papers around on his desk, then finally looked up at her, and shook his head.

“Disgraceful, all that money, and this is what I got,” he finally said. “We have guests coming, and I expect you to make yourself presentable. You’ll greet them at the door, then play hostess for drinks and dinner. These are very important people, Hailey. Your entire future depends on tonight, so don’t screw it up. I paid a lot of money to turn you into a sophisticated young lady, and it better not have been a waste.”

“I’m a little more than that,” she said, annoyed. “I have a master’s degree in education. That’s what you paid for, and something I wanted to talk to you about. I’m going to apply for a job with the school district this week. I might need to borrow a car if they call me in for an interview.”

Her father was scribbling on a piece of paper but paused and looked up at her, “I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” he said, shaking his head. “You will not be working, and certainly not as a teacher. You have obligations here that need your attention.”

She sat stunned for a second, “Wait, you can’t mean……” her words trailed off. “What kind of obligations?”

After a long sigh, her father sat back in his chair, “I can’t believe I have to explain it to you,” he said, shaking his head. “Letting you get that degree was just an indulgence on my part; you won’t be using it, no daughter of mine is

going to work, and I'm sure the man you marry will feel the same way. Now get upstairs and get yourself fixed up. You look like you've been rolling around in the mud, and do something with your hair. The first of your prospective husbands will be here in a few minutes."

CHAPTER 2



NOAH

Noah put his plate down on the table, then sank into a chair, relieved to have a few minutes to himself, knowing that he should be pleased by the turnout that morning, but more aware than ever that Connor wasn't there. Walking in without him had been so strange, and having everyone ask where he was hadn't helped him adjust to his son's absence. Now, he just wanted a few minutes to eat in peace so he could lick his wounds before he had to get back out and mingle with the other single fathers.

The group had been his idea, a way for single dads to connect, a safe place where they could talk about their challenges and victories, find help, or just have a few hours of grown-up time. Over the last four years, he'd seen faces come and go, made some close friends, and helped a lot of men figure out how to be single fathers. It had filled a gap in his life, but he was beginning to wonder if it was time to back away. Conner was growing up and needed him in different ways. All the energy he put into the group could be redirected to his son, who lately had become difficult to deal with.

"Wow, this place is packed, I've never seen this many people at a meeting before," Grant said, sitting down next to him. "Why do you look like the world is coming to an end? I would think that you'd be happy."

"I am glad we have such a big turn out," he said, with a sigh. "I've just been sitting here wondering if my time here is over."

"You mean like you're going to quit?" Grant asked, staring at him, a horrified look on his face. "You can't quit. This is your group, you started it."

No one would know what to do if you left.”

“You’re laying that on pretty thick,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m serious, Grant, Conner didn’t want to come today. He says he’s outgrown it, and somehow it doesn’t make much sense for me to be here without him.”

“I get what you’re saying, but this isn’t just about Connor,” Grant said. “This group helps a lot of men who have nowhere else to turn; you can’t just abandon it.”

“I wouldn’t just abandon you,” he said. “I’d find someone to take my place; it’s not that hard. Anyone could do it. In fact, you might be the perfect man for the job.”

“Wait just a second,” Grant said, shaking his head. “I think you’re getting ahead of yourself. You know how kids are, next week Connor will be all excited to come, and everything will be fine.”

“I don’t know, he’s seven now, he’s growing up,” he said. “I need to think of what’s good for Connor first. Things haven’t been easy with Maxine gone. I’m a terrible cook, and the ranch takes so much of my time, so letting this go might be what’s best.”

“Just promise me that you’ll give it some time before you decide,” Grant said. “It would be a shame to lose you for no reason. We depend on you around here. Have you looked for someone to replace Maxine while she’s gone? I can’t believe there isn’t anyone out there who would take the job for a few months.”

“I’ve tried, I’m still trying, but no one wants a temporary job,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve had to hire a cleaning service the last few weeks, and let me tell you, that’s not cheap.”

“I’ll ask around; maybe I can find someone to help you out a bit,” Grant said, shaking his head. “Did you think about asking around here? That is what we’re all here for, to help each other.”

“There are a few new faces here today, I guess it’s worth a shot,” he said, feeling a little better. “Maybe I will give it a try. It doesn’t hurt to ask.”

By the time the food on the back table was gone, he had a few leads on people who could come out to the ranch and clean for him at a much lower price than he’d been paying. It wasn’t much, but it was a start to finding a better temporary solution to keeping the house running. Feeling better than he had when he arrived, he started cleaning up, looking forward to picking Connor up on his way home, smiling for the first time that day.

Connor was waiting for him with the rest of the boys in the front yard

when he got there, a huge smile on his face, and he ran over to him when he started up the front walk. “Hey, Dad, we had so much fun last night,” he said. “We stayed up late watching movies and eating junk food, then we had waffles this morning.”

“It sounds like you had a lot of fun, I’m glad,” he said, smiling down at Connor. “I hope you remembered to thank Tommy’s parents; it was nice of them to have you all over.”

“I sure did, and I even helped with the dishes this morning,” Connor said. “I was thinking maybe I could have a sleepover soon. I’m sure the guys would love coming out to the ranch. We could ride horses and play in the barn; it would be epic.”

Noah stared at his son for a second, then burst out laughing, “Epic, huh?” he asked. “That’s pretty good, but we’ll have to see about the sleepover. I’m not sure we’re ready to host a party like that.”

Connor looked up at him, “You’ll think about it though, won’t you?” he asked. “You promise?”

“I promise kiddo,” he said. “Now, let’s go say goodbye, I thought maybe we’d get out the fishing poles this afternoon.”

Hailey

Hailey stood in front of the mirror studying her reflection, trying to put a happy look on her face, but the last thing she felt was happy; she was miserable. Over the past week, her father had managed to stomp on every one of her dreams and plans while simultaneously tearing her apart every chance he got. She was beaten down by the constant insults, criticisms, and snide remark and wasn’t sure how much more she could stand, but thanks to the constant demands her father made on her time, she’d had no time to figure out a way to escape.

After a week spent arranging flowers, planning meals, and preparing for the endless dinners, teas, and drink parties her father had arranged, it had become sickening clear to her that her father was basically selling her off to the highest bidder. For the first few days, she’d told herself that he would change his mind, that he would relent and let her live her life the way she wanted to, but no amount of arguing had budged him. In fact, it had gone so badly the last time she talked to him. The terrible things he’d said to her still made tears come to her eyes.

They'd been in the study after dinner the night before. She'd spent most of the meal fending off the wandering hands of one of her father's friends and was in no mood for one of his lectures about how she should have behaved. She'd let him go on for a few minutes, before getting to her feet, planning to leave before she said something to make things worse, but he stopped her before she could escape.

"Where do you think you're going?" her father asked. "I'm not done talking to you."

"I'm going to bed, I'm too tired to listen to this tonight," she said, heading for the door. "And I'm done being groped by your friends while I'm trying to eat dinner. It's disgusting, and all you've done is encourage them. I'm not one of your cattle, you can't just auction me off like a prize cow. I'm a human being, you don't own me."

Her father was up from the chair and blocking her path to the door in only seconds, "Now, that's where you're wrong," he said, glaring down at her. "Do you really think I invested so much in your upbringing to just let you fritter it all away teaching a bunch of brats? There was one reason and one reason only that I forked out all the money that I did; you're going to open some doors for me. I haven't decided which ones yet, but you, my dear, are going to take this family to the next level."

"I won't do it," she said, shaking her head and glaring at him even though she was shaking inside. "I won't marry a man I don't love so that you can make more money, it's insulting that you would even think that I would agree to something like that."

"It doesn't matter if you agree or not, it's going to happen," her father growled. "If you are as smart as you think you are, you'll go along with it quietly. After all, I am willing to let you have some say on who you marry, that is, if you're reasonable."

"And if I don't cooperate?" she asked. "I suppose you'll kick me out, toss me on the street like the garbage."

"Well, look at that, you are as smart as you claim to be," her father said, grinning at her. "You're no good to me unless you cooperate, as you put it, and if that's what it takes to prove to you that you belong to me, then I'm more than willing to watch you suffer."

She'd never been close to her father, but had always assumed that he loved her if he didn't show it, but that little fantasy dissolved as she stared up at him. "That's what I thought," he said, when she didn't strike back. "I

expect you to be on your best behavior from now on, no more ice princess, these men I'm introducing you to can all do something for this family. I expect you to be more than welcoming to all of them."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked, backing away from him. "You want me to sleep with all of them?"

"Of course not; how crass of you to even suggest it," her father said, scowling at her and shaking his head. "But if one or two of them want a little sample of what they'll be getting if they marry you, you're to be gracious about it."

"Gracious?" she asked, feeling her knees beginning to shake. "Just how gracious? I just want to know. After all, I wouldn't want to disappoint you; being a whore for you is better than being out on the street."

The slap, when it came, almost knocked her off her feet, "Get up to your room before I do something that will leave a mark," her father roared. "I don't want to see you until the party tomorrow night, and you'd better be wearing the dress I picked out for you."

Now standing in front of the mirror, she could see the dark shadow of the bruise he'd left on her cheek that no amount of makeup could cover up, and she wondered how her father would explain it away. Letting her eyes travel down further, she realized that none of the men would be looking at her face, they'd all be staring at her chest, and she tried to pull up the red dress just a little more. She managed to cover a few more inches of skin before the fabric snapped back into place, leaving most of her breasts exposed, and she turned away from the mirror, her cheeks blazing with embarrassment that she had to go downstairs dressed like she was.

There was a knock on the door, "Ms. Gordon, your father wants you downstairs now," Kevin called through the door. "Would you like me to wait and escort you?"

Taking a deep breath, she turned away from the mirror, "I'll be fine on my own, thank you, Kevin," she called, slipping on the four-inch heels that had come with the dress. "I'll just be a second more."

When she walked into the spacious living room on the first floor a few minutes later, the embarrassment quickly turned to disgust when six pairs of eyes turned to her, each and every one filled with undisguised desire. Taking a few shaky steps into the room, she considered running back upstairs and packing a bag, but instead, when her father stepped up behind her and gave her a shove, she stumbled forward right into one of the men's arms.

“Well, it’s certainly nice to meet you too,” the man said, winking at her.
“I’m Alexander Shreveport. Let me get you a drink, and we’ll get to know each other better.”

CHAPTER 3



NOAH

On Monday morning, Noah pulled up in front of the feed store, turned off his truck, and sat for a second, enjoying the early morning sunshine, before getting out. He and Connor had spent the weekend fishing, eating pizza, and watching movies. He'd even given his son's video games a try, and for the first time in weeks, he was relaxed and happy. A good weekend with his son didn't solve all the problems they had, but it sure went a long way toward taking away some of his stress.

Looking forward to hearing some good gossip, he opened the double glass door and walked into the feed store, pausing for just a second to inhale the scent of hay, grain, and manure. A feeling of comfort washed over him, especially when he saw all his favorite old men in the rocking chairs around the cold fireplace in the back, a cup of coffee in their old wrinkled hands, their eyes flashing with amusement as one of them told a story.

"Hey, Tobis," he called when the owner came hustling out of the back room. "I just stopped by to pick up that load of feed I ordered last week."

"Oh, sure, Noah, it's out back," Tobis said. "I'm a bit short-handed today, but I've got a girl out there trying out for the job; she should be able to help you."

"Great, do you mind if I grab a couple of bales of alfalfa while I'm at it?" he asked. "I've got a couple of stubborn calves who just won't gain any weight."

"No problem, I'll put it on your account," Tobis said. "But before you go, do me a favor, grab a cup of coffee, and say hi to the boys before you leave."

They've been driving me crazy all morning trying to help out."

He laughed, "I'll be happy to distract them for a while," he said, heading for the coffee pot. "I haven't heard any good gossip in a long time."

After a long chat with the boys, he returned to his truck and pulled around to the back of the building where the huge stacks of feed, bales of several kinds of hay, and an assortment of equipment that any rancher needed were kept. After parking in the loading zone, he waited for a few minutes but no one appeared, so he got out of his truck and started looking for his order. He found it and a big surprise when he walked around a big stack of straw bales and couldn't help but stand there staring at what he knew was Hailey's rear end as she struggled to lift a bag of feed onto her shoulder.

"It looks like you could use a little help," he said. "Those things are pretty heavy."

Hailey screamed, then jumped, making her jostle the bag in her hands. It tore open, and grain began to spill on the ground in a big heap before she could close up the hole, leaving her standing in a pile of oats. Still holding the empty bag, she turned to him, then threw it on the ground, a look of panic on her face.

"If Tobis sees this, he won't give me the job," she said, rushing past him. "I have to get it cleaned up right away."

She rushed off before he could tell her that he'd take the blame and came back with a broom and a shovel, "This will just take a second," she said, then looked over at him and paused for a second, her eyes rounding with surprise, then narrowing with anger. "I should have known it was you. Do you make a habit of going around scaring people?"

"Nope, just you, I guess," he said, reaching for the broom. "Let me help you clean that up."

"No, thank you," Hailey said, jerking the broom away from him, banging it into the stack of hay bales behind her. "I can handle this myself."

Above her head, the top bales of hay began to sway, "Hailey, be careful the hay behind you....." he started to say, but she gave him a dirty look, and he shut his mouth.

He let the stack of hay sway a few more times before trying to warn her again, but before he could get the words out, the stack began to fall apart, sending the bales of hay tumbling toward Hailey. Without thinking, he grabbed her and pulled her out of the way, knocking them both off balance, giving her no choice but to grab onto him. The bales landed on the ground

with a big thump, and then a cloud of dust rose into the air, blocking out the sight of the ruined hay for a minute before the wind blew it away.

But he wasn't paying attention to the mess only a few feet away, he was too busy fighting off the desire that thundered through his veins, awakening his magic and the wolf inside him. Too shocked by his response to move, he held onto Hailey, unable to let go, the feeling of having her in his arms so right, so natural, all he could do was pull her closer. When he looked down at her, she was staring up at him, her mouth hanging open, her eyes full of desire, and he leaned down to kiss her.

Before he could touch his lips to hers, the back door of the store slammed shut, and Tobis came striding around the corner, "What's taking so long?" he called, then saw the mess. "What the hell happened?"

When Tobis looked over at the two of them, Hailey pushed him away, her cheeks turning crimson, "I'm sorry, it was an accident," she said. "I'll get it cleaned up right away."

"I think you've done enough damage for one day," Tobis said, shaking his head. "The interview is over. I'm sorry it didn't work out, but I warned you this isn't the kind of work a woman should be doing."

Hailey looked over at him, then over at Tobis, "But it wasn't my fault," she said. "Noah was the one who....."

"Noah isn't the one looking for a job," Tobis said. "I'm sorry, I really am, but it just isn't going to work out."

She opened her mouth again, then closed it, gave him a dirty look, then stomped off, "Fine, there are other jobs in town," she said, stripping off her apron and dropping it on the ground. "I don't need this one."

When she disappeared into the store, he looked over at Tobis, "It wasn't all her fault, I snuck up on her and scared her," he said. "And I was the one who kissed her."

Tobis shook his head, "That was just the frosting on the cake, she's been screwing things up all morning, and it's only ten o'clock," he said. "I don't know what's going on between the two of you, and I don't want to know. Now, let's get that feed of yours loaded up so I can get this mess cleaned up."

Hailey

"All right, Mrs. Hillcrest, I think we're all set here," Hailey said, putting the woman's change into her hand. "I put everything in the bag for you, and I

wrote the name of that book on the back of your receipt. I promise your son will love it; they should have several copies at the library. There's nothing like a good book to help pass the time."

"You're so sweet, Hailey," Mrs. Hillcrest said. "I'll stop by the library on my way home."

Even after the woman was gone, the smile was still on her face, the disaster the day before at the feed store all but forgotten. "You are a natural," Sheila said. "In all my years running the front of this store, I've never seen anyone catch on so quickly. Mr. Butler is going to want to hire you for sure."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, afraid to get her hopes up. "I really need this job to tide me over until I can find a teaching position."

"Well, I'm going to give him my approval," Sheila said. "It's hard to believe you've never had a job before."

"If you'd seen what happened yesterday, you wouldn't say that," she said, then shook her head. "Never mind, you don't want to hear about that, you might change your mind about hiring me. What do you want me to do next?"

"A go-getter, huh?" Sheila asked. "Okay, let's put you out on the floor and see what you can do. We've got some merchandise that just came in, and it needs to be priced and put on the shelves. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I think so," she said. "Just show me what needs to go out. If I have any questions, I'll find you."

It didn't take Hailey long to discover that there was something calming and reassuring about filling the shelves with brightly colored merchandise, and even enjoyed taking the few extra minutes to clean and straighten. When she'd finished with the first cart, she wheeled it to the front, then went back into the warehouse, got a second, and started in a new aisle. Deciding that she would gladly accept the job if it was offered to her, she lost herself in the process until a voice she'd never forget broke through her concentration.

"I'm here to pick up a prescription for my mother," Simon Buckner said. "I believe it should be ready by now, that is, if the nitwit of a caregiver we hired even called it in."

"I'm not sure, sir," Sheila said. "Let me go in the back and check."

Panicked that she was going to be seen by one of her father's best friends and the man who'd groped her several times the weekend before, she squatted down, hunched over, and started toward the back room. She'd only gone a couple of steps when a pair of cowboy boots filled her vision and her

heart sank, sure that she was going to look up to find Simon towering over her, the same lecherous look on his face.

“I know I probably shouldn’t get involved, but I’m going to anyway,” Noah said with a little smile on his face. “Did you lose something?”

“Go away,” she hissed at him. “And get out of my way.”

Noah stepped to the side and watched her slink away, then followed her, “Oh, I get it, you’re hiding from someone,” he said. “Is it an old boyfriend, oh, or even better, a current one?”

“Will you please leave me alone,” she said, continuing on her way. “He’s going to see me, and that’s all I need.”

“So, it is a boyfriend,” Noah said, still walking behind her. “Why don’t you want him to see you? Are you mad at him? Is he mad at you?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, he’s an old creep who doesn’t know how to keep his hands to himself,” she hissed. “Now, will you please go away?”

Noah let her get to the next aisle before he came after her again, “Did that guy hurt you?” he asked. “Did he do something to you?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at him. “I don’t need you to protect me, I’m perfectly capable of doing that myself, so go away.”

“Wait,” Noah said, reaching out to her. “You’re going to.....”

She felt her hip collide with something hard, she lost her balance, and the next thing she knew, she was tumbling into a huge tower of twelve packs. One after another, they went sliding off the pyramid, the thin cardboard boxes split open, and cans went rolling all over the store, some spraying their sugary contents as they disappeared under the shelves. Only a few seconds later, Mr. Butler came running out of the back room, slid to a stop, looked around at the mess, and then began to hyperventilate.

“Oh, my God,” he cried. “What happened? How are we ever going to clean this up. Who did this?”

Scrambling to her feet, she glanced over at the pharmacy, relieved to see that Simon was gone, “I’m sorry, it was an accident, I’ll clean it all up,” she said, then looked over at Noah, who had backed a few steps away. “It won’t take that long.”

Mr. Butler’s face had turned scarlet, “I think.....that will be enough for one day,” he said. “I’ll clean this up, you go on home. Thank you for coming in.”

She had no choice but to walk away, the look on Mr. Butler’s face made

that much clear, but she gave Noah a dirty look on her way by, deciding that he was the world's biggest jerk. He'd managed to sabotage two jobs, and she'd never done anything to him. If she wasn't already humiliated, she would have given him a piece of her mind, but she slunk away instead, holding back the tears that filled her eyes. She had to find a job, couldn't imagine going through with marrying a man she didn't love, but at the rate she was going, she was going to end up living on the street.

CHAPTER 4



NOAH

Noah pulled his truck into the hardware store's parking lot, shut off the engine, glad that this was his last errand of the day, and more than ready to get it over with so he could go home. Not that home was a place he especially wanted to be that night; Connor had been nothing but trouble the entire week, and he wasn't in the mood for another battle with his suddenly sullen child. Their great weekend had been followed by several days of calls from the day camp about Connor misbehaving, a night of him refusing to eat his dinner or take a shower, a morning of him talking back, and just today, a call from a parent that he'd bullying another boy.

All of it was so unlike Connor, he wasn't sure what to think, but knew that he was going to have to face the possibility that his son's magic was beginning to come to life. It was a bit early for it to happen, but the signs were all there; the wolf inside him was waking up, and he wasn't sure his son was ready for what would follow. But it was his job to prepare him, and there wasn't any time to waste. He'd have to talk to Connor over the weekend, explain what would soon be happening to him before he lost control of the situation.

Getting out of the truck, he felt an intense longing for his parents and promised himself that he'd call them that night. His father would have some advice; he'd been through the same situation himself. He'd been older when the change had begun to happen to him, but he could remember all too well how scary and confusing it had been, just not what his father had told him at the time. What he did remember was that his parents had been there for him

through the transition, making it easier in so many ways, and he'd do the same for his son; he just had to figure out how to do that.

Feeling a little bit better, he pushed open the door to the hardware store, shaking his head when the bell over the door started to jangle loudly before falling silent. "Hey, Noah, I was beginning to think you weren't going to make it in today," Hank said, stepping out from behind the counter. "Those nails you ordered are in the back. Looks like you've got a lot of fence to build; I don't envy you that for sure."

"It's not exactly my idea of fun either," he said, shaking his head. "But I've brought in some extra help so it should go fast, a couple weeks at most."

"Well, you just let me know if you need anything else," Hank said. "You know how much I appreciate your business, just give me a second, and I'll have the new girl bring your order up."

"You hired someone new?" he asked. "What happened to Clide?"

"He moved over to Monroe. I sure was sorry to see him go," Hank said, shaking his head. "I haven't officially hired her yet, it's just a trial kind of thing, but so far, it's been going well. Honestly, I can't afford to be too choosy. There aren't exactly a lot of people beating down the door for this job."

Hank got on the little radio he kept strapped to his belt and called the back room. When he was finished, they chatted for a little while as they waited, but as the minutes ticked by, he could see his friend become annoyed. "I don't know what's taking her so long," he finally said. "I'd better go check and see what the problem is."

Before Hank could come out from behind the counter, Hailey came out of the back room, her arms loaded down with six huge boxes of nails, the top one blocking her view. "Well, it's about time," Hank said, shaking his head. "But I don't know why she didn't use the dolly, I showed her where it was."

He started toward Hailey to help with the nails, but she chose that moment to look around the pile in her arms, and when she saw him, she hesitated just enough that the stack of boxes began to wobble. A look of panic appeared on Hailey's face as she tried to keep them balanced, but it was quickly replaced with fear when the top box began to slide off. Only a second later, it went crashing to the floor, split open, and the nails went flying everywhere with a cheerful tinkling sound.

It was a chain reaction after that as more boxes tumbled to the floor, until Hailey was holding only one box, a look of complete shock on her face. He

reached over and took the last box trying not to laugh, but the tears that appeared in Hailey's eyes chased the laughter away. No one spoke for a long time, but he could hear Hank breathing heavily behind him and winced, knowing the man had a temper and it was about to be unleashed on Hailey.

"Why didn't you use the dolly?" Hank asked through clenched teeth. "It's going to take hours to clean all this up, and Noah may not even want all these nails now. Do you have any idea how much this will cost me?"

"I'm sorry, I forgot about the dolly," Hailey said. "I'll get this all cleaned up, I promise, and I'll do it for free."

"You bet you will," Hank growled. "And if Noah doesn't want the nails, you're going to pay for them too."

"Yes, sir," Hailey said, then bent down and started scooping up the nails into a pile.

"Oh, for goodness sake, are you an idiot? Get a broom and sweep them up," Hank bellowed, then shook his head. "Never mind, just go home, this isn't working out."

Hailey froze, then sat staring at the floor for a long time, slowly got to her feet and gave him a dirty look, "You're determined to ruin my life, aren't you?" she asked. "I just want to know what did I ever did to you?"

Before he could answer, she shook her head, "Never mind, it doesn't matter," she said. "This job wasn't for me anyway."

He watched her leave the store, then let out a long sigh, "Well, that didn't go so well," he finally said. "I'll help you clean this up, and don't worry about the nails, I'll still take them."

Hailey

Hailey made it all the way to her car before she gave into the tears and let them come, sobbing into the steering wheel. She wondered why it seemed like the entire world was against her. Until she'd come home, her life had been perfect; she'd had clear goals and the ability to achieve those goals, but she hadn't understood the price she was eventually going to have to pay for that freedom. As she sat there thinking about it, she stopped feeling sorry for herself. She still had her degree, her meeting with the superintendent of schools was scheduled for the next day, and the job at the hardware store wasn't that important.

Taking a deep breath, she dried her tears, determined not to let her father

win, even if it meant sleeping in her car for a few months until school started. Anything was better than being pawed by a man she didn't love. Her father thought he was in control of her life, and until a few weeks ago, he had been, she just hadn't known it, but she was smarter now. She'd break free no matter what she had to do.

She was just about to start the car when Noah came out of the store. He was carrying two plastic wash buckets, both full of nails, and laughing with Hank. A surge of anger shot through her, but it was quickly followed by a wave of desire, and she closed her eyes with a little cry of frustration. She should hate the man, he'd ruined three job interviews for her, but instead, her body was pulsing and tingling at just the sight of him. It was confusing and frustrating, a complication she didn't need right then, not when she already had so much to sort out in her life.

She needed to work on finding a place to live and getting ready for her interview tomorrow, one she was sure would go much differently than the last three since she was actually qualified to teach. Squaring her shoulders, she started the car, took one last look over at Noah, then pulled out of the parking lot, determined not to think about the man again. He'd done nothing but mess up her life, and had seemed to enjoy it. He was a first-class jerk even if he was incredibly handsome, but he was not the kind of man she wanted to get involved with. At least, that's what she told herself as she drove away, but she couldn't help taking one last look at him in the rearview mirror as she turned onto Main Street.

* * *

"Well, Ms. Gordon, this is certainly an impressive resume," Superintendent Mitchell said, setting it down on the desk and looking over at her. "Besides an excellent secondary education, your volunteer experience is impressive. It's been a long time since I've been presented with such an excellent prospect for our district."

"I'm excited to start my career, and Prospect is the place I want to be," she said, relief pouring through her. "Just tell me where you want me, and I'll be there."

The superintendent's smile faltered just a bit, "That's where we run into a little problem. I'm afraid I don't have an opening for a full-time teacher

now,” he said. “But I don’t want to let you slip through my fingers. I’d like to sign you up to be a substitute teacher. I can’t promise you full-time hours, but it would get your foot in the door.”

Disappointment made her stomach clench uncomfortably, “Oh, I didn’t think.....I mean, they always drilled it into our heads that small towns like this need teachers desperately,” she said, embarrassed for just assuming there would be a job waiting for her. “I sort of need to work full time, Mr. Mitchell. Are you sure there’s nothing available?”

He shook his head, “I’m sorry, Ms. Gordon, there’s nothing I can do,” he said, then brightened up. “If you’d be willing to go somewhere else besides Prospect, I could make a few phone calls. There might be other openings around the area.”

She’d had her heart set on Prospect but saw now how naive that had been, “That would be very kind of you,” she said, forcing herself to smile. “And I would be happy to substitute for you as much as you need me; it just means I’ll have to get another job, but that won’t be a problem.”

“Well, then, Ms. Gordon,” he said, getting to his feet. “Welcome to the district. I’ll let Bernice know that you’ll be joining out little family, and she’ll get you all the paperwork you’ll need. I’ll get in touch with you a few weeks before school starts, and we’ll go over any questions you might have.”

“I appreciate the opportunity,” she said, getting to her feet and shaking the man’s hand. “I’ll look forward to your call, and thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“It was my pleasure,” Superintendent Mitchell said, walking her to the door. “I look forward to working with you.”

She left the administration building with a stack of paperwork and a feeling of disappointment, but told herself this was what being an adult was all about: life didn’t always work out just the way you wanted it to. It wasn’t the end of the world; she’d just have to be patient and hope that a job opened up before the school year started. Until then she was back on the hunt for a job and an apartment before her father forced her to do something she’d deeply regret.

CHAPTER 5



NOAH

After leaving the hardware store, Noah drove over to the elementary school, ignoring a few of the posted speed limits since he was late, but when he pulled up, he was surprised to find a group of parents milling around in the parking lot, their faces full of concern. There was no sign of the bus that took the kids up into the mountains for day camp, and he jumped out of the truck to find out what was going on.

“Hey, where’s the bus?” he asked one of the men he knew. “It should be here by now.”

“It’s ten minutes late, and we haven’t heard a word from the driver,” the man said. “I’m thinking about getting in my car and going to look for them; they’re never this late.”

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon,” he said, turning to watch the street like the rest of the parents. “Connie has been driving for the school district for ten years, she’s the best driver we have, and they’re not that late.”

“But Connie is never late,” a woman said. “That’s what has us so worried.”

A second later, the bus turned the corner, and there was an audible sigh of relief from the small crowd, “See, everything is fine,” he said, shaking his head. “They’re just a few minutes late.”

When the bus pulled to a stop, the door swung open, and it was obvious from the look on Connie’s face that she wasn’t happy, and even worse, the kids got off the bus one by one without saying a word and went to their parents. There was no sign of Connor, and his heart sank as a feeling of dread

spread through him, especially when Connie caught his eye and shook her head in disappointment. He was standing alone when she finally got off the bus, Connor trailing along behind her, a frightened look on his face.

“Hey, Noah,” Connie said, then looked down at Connor. “We had some trouble on the bus this afternoon, and I’m afraid Connor isn’t going to be able to ride with us anymore.”

“You’re kicking him off the bus?” he asked, then looked down at his son. “What’s this about Connor?”

He just shrugged, “It wasn’t that bad,” he said. “She’s just being a.....”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” he barked. “Go get in the truck, I want to talk to Connie.”

They watched him slink away, “I’m sorry,” he said, turning to Connie when Connor was safely in the truck. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately. What did he do on the bus?”

“He started two fights and refused to listen to me when I told him to sit down,” Connie said. “I had to stop the bus twice to deal with him, that’s why we were late. It’s so unlike him, I didn’t know what to think at first, but.....”

He looked over at Connie, “I know, I’m going to talk to him this weekend,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting this so soon, he’s only seven, but it’s pretty obvious what’s going on.”

“It’s not an easy time for him,” Connie said. “I watched my brothers go through it, but I know you’ll help him. You’re a good father.”

“I’ve been stretched so thin lately, I haven’t been able to give him the kind of attention he needs,” he said, feeling guilty. “I don’t suppose you know someone who wants a job looking after a rambunctious seven-year-old.”

“I’ll put out some feelers,” Connie said. “I’m sorry about the bus, but until Connor gets a little more control of his impulses, it’s just too dangerous.”

“I understand,” he said. “Thanks for listening to me complain.”

“Any time,” Connie said. “We’ve been friends our whole lives, and we’re in the same clan. I just wish I could do more to help.”

“You’ve done enough,” he said. “I’d better go deal with my wayward child. Wish me luck.”

Connor had a look of defiance on his face when he slid behind the wheel, “You can wipe that look off your face right now,” he said without looking over at him. “We’re going home, and you’re going to shower, eat dinner, and

then go straight to bed.”

“But Dad, it wasn’t my fault,” Connor said, the defiant look gone. “Everything went all funny, and I got so mad, I couldn’t help myself, but you probably don’t believe me.”

He sighed, “I believe you,” he said. “And we’re going to have to do something about that, but not tonight, I’m too tired.”

“You’re always too tired or too busy for me,” Connor said, turning away from him. “I’m getting used to it.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” he said. “I took the weekend off again so we could spend it together, but I need you to behave yourself. I can’t keep making excuses for you.”

Connor’s face instantly brightened, “Can we go camping?” he asked. “We haven’t been yet this year, and I really want to go.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea. There’s a cave I want to show you,” he said, finally able to look over at his son. “We’ll leave right after the meeting Saturday morning.”

“Oh, Dad, do we have to go to that stupid meeting?” Connor asked, a scowl on his face. “I don’t want to go play with a bunch of crying babies. Maybe I could hang out with one of my friends instead.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to be possible. Considering the way you behaved on the bus today, I’d like to keep an eye on you,” he said, ignoring the look on Connor's face. “That’s the deal if you want to go camping, take it or leave it.”

Hailey

Hailey arrived at the diner half an hour early, turned off her car, then sat staring at the front door for a few minutes, trying to calm herself down before she went inside for her interview. Instead of thinking about this being her last chance to find a job, she closed her eyes and thought about all she’d accomplished instead, a technique that had always worked for her in the past.

She had her foot in the door with the school district. It wasn’t the job she’d been hoping for, but it was a place to start, and she was going to take that as a win. After days of searching, she’d found a furnished apartment over a garage in a nice neighborhood, and the landlord was willing to ignore the fact that she had no rental history as long as she could prove that she had an income. Paying the damage deposit, first and last month’s rent would wipe

out the little emergency savings that she had, but it would be worth it to get out from under her father's roof.

Feeling a little better, she got out of the car, telling herself that even if everything did hinge on her getting the job today, she'd made the first steps to becoming an independent woman. She was so much closer to making a life of her own, and was proud of how far she'd come. She just hoped that Noah didn't show up and ruin everything like he'd been doing all week. Just thinking about him made her scowl, so she pushed him out of her mind, and with a confident step walked into the diner, determined to nail down the job and secure her future.

When Ruth, one of the owners of the diner saw her, a smile spread across her face, "You're here early. That's a point in your favor," she said, gesturing to a stool at the long counter. "Come over here and let me get you some coffee and something to eat. I don't like my people to work on an empty stomach."

Warmed by the woman's concern, she slid behind the counter, "Some coffee would be great," she said. "But I'm not sure I could eat a thing, I'm a little nervous."

"There's nothing to be nervous about, I'm sure you'll do great," Ruth said, patting her on the arm. "It will be a mad house in here this morning, but I've got you working with my best server. All you have to do is listen and pay attention, and by the end of the morning you'll have it all figured out."

"I sure hope that you're right, I haven't been very good at the other things I've tried," she said, deciding to be honest. "And I kinda need this job to get the apartment I want."

"You're not going to live out at your father's ranch?" Ruth asked, a bit surprised. "I bet he's not very happy about that."

"I haven't exactly told him yet," she said. "I don't think he's going to be very supportive of my decision to move out, he has.....other plans for me. I want to make sure I've got it all figured out before I tell him."

Ruth studied her for a second, "Your father is used to getting his way; he's not going to take it well," she said, then shook her head. "But maybe it's time someone showed him that he doesn't rule the world."

"You sound like you don't like my father much," she said, taking the cup of coffee Ruth put in front of her. "Not that I blame you, he's not a very likable person."

"I just don't have much patience for people like your father," Ruth said,

with a sigh. “He acts all high and mighty, like he’s better than all the rest of us just because he has money, but the truth is, up until your grandfather came back from the war, your family was just like the rest of us, scrambling to make a living.”

“But that’s not right,” she said, confused. “My father said we’ve been the richest family in Prospect since it was founded, that it was because of us that there was even a town here.”

Ruth sighed, “I guess I should have kept my mouth shut. I’m sorry, it’s really none of my business,” she said. “Let me get you some breakfast. It’s going to start getting crazy in here soon.”

As she ate the plate of bacon, eggs, and toast Ruth brought her, she studied the menu, hoping to memorize as much she could, but she couldn’t stop thinking about what the older woman had said. When Ruth came back to retrieve the plate, a pleased look on her face when she saw that Hailey had eaten everything, she couldn’t resist prying into the past just a little bit more. After all, it was her family that they were talking about.

“You said my family didn’t get rich until after the war,” she said. “Where did all the money come from?”

Ruth sighed, then turned and put her plate in the dish tub behind the counter, and for a second, she didn’t think she was going to answer. “I guess since I opened this conversation up, I should finish it, but I want you to remember that what I’m going to tell you is only rumor and speculation. There was never any proof that your grandfather did anything illegal.”

“That doesn’t sound very good,” she said, feeling the ground shift beneath her. “Are you saying my grandfather was a criminal?”

“Like I said, there wasn’t any proof at the time, and I was just a kid back then, but he came home from the war with a wife and a pocket full of money. When anyone asked him where it came from, he always just said that he was in the right place at the right time,” Ruth said, clearly sorry she’d brought it up. “But a couple years after he got back, a man from the army showed up asking about him. Apparently, he was part of a group of soldiers that liberated one of the concentration camps. When they got inside, they discovered that the Nazis had killed everyone before they disappeared. Evidently, some of the bodies had been stripped of all their valuables, and the man seemed to think that your grandfather had something to do with it.”

She shook her head, “That can’t be right,” she said, then let out a long sigh. “It probably is though; it would explain so much. I feel a little sick all of

a sudden.”

Ruth quickly poured her a glass of water, “Here, drink this,” she said. “I’m sorry, I should have kept my mouth shut. You didn’t need to hear all of that, at least not today.”

After downing half of the glass, she felt better, “It’s okay, you’re right. I did need to hear that,” she said. “Now I’m even more determined to get away from my father; I’ve benefitted from that money my entire life, but I won’t do it for another day if I don’t have to.”

Ruth patted her on the arm, “You’re a good kid,” she said. “Now, it looks like the rush is starting, so you’d better put your stuff in the back. Tammy should be here any second, and I want you to be ready when she gets here.”

CHAPTER 6



NOAH

Noah ushered his sullen child through the crowded diner, wanting to give him a smack on the top of the head to knock some sense into him, but knew it wouldn't do any good. Connor was determined to make the morning as difficult as possible, and he was determined not to let him get under his skin, no matter how hard it was. Since he'd gotten out of bed, his son had been impossible, talking back, challenging his authority, and dragging his feet, hoping they'd be late, which had worked.

As he passed the counter, he caught Ruth's eye and mouthed an apology to her, but she waved him off, and he noticed the harried look on her face for the first time. Looking around the dining room, he understood why: every table was full, and from what he could tell, she was missing a couple of servers. He was just about to step into the back room where the group always met on Saturday mornings when he saw Hailey coming out of the kitchen, a stack of plates on her arm, a look of intense concentration on her face.

"Hey, Dad, look," Connor said, pointing to Hailey. "There's Hailey, let's go talk to her."

"She's working, son," he said. "I don't think we should bother her."

"But Dad, I haven't seen her since that day you made her fall in the stream," Connor protested. "Please, I'm sure she won't mind."

"Maybe later when she's not so busy," he said. "Come on, we'd better go, we're already late."

"You never let me do anything I want to do," Connor said, stomping his foot. "I want to talk to Hailey, and I want to talk to her now."

Almost at the end of his patience, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “Well, that’s not going to happen,” he said. “We’re going to the meeting. You can either sit with me or go play video games with the other kids. Those are your only two choices.”

Connor looked up at him, a combative look on his face, but he gave his son a look that had always stopped him from throwing a fit before. “Don’t push me son,” he said. “I don’t want to embarrass either of us, but I will if I have to.”

“Fine, I’ll go to your stupid meeting, but I’m not playing with those babies,” Connor said, stomping away from him. “I’ll just sit and be bored with you.”

“It’s your choice,” he said, relieved it had worked. “As long as you’re where I can see you, I don’t care what you do.”

The back room was as crowded as the rest of the diner, and it took them a long time to make it to the table in the back of the room where he always sat. “Sorry we’re late,” he said, pushing his son down into a chair. “Connor has decided to join us this morning. He would rather hang out with us than the little kids.”

“Well, that’s too bad, Zander was looking forward to seeing you,” Grant said. “But welcome to the group. Jayce and I were just talking about the new parking lot the mayor wants to build.”

“Oh, okay,” Connor said. “What’s wrong with a parking lot?”

It was five minutes before Grant stopped speaking, and he almost wanted to laugh at the look on his son’s face. “Hey, are you hungry?” he asked, cutting Grant off before he could go on. “We should go get some food before it’s all gone.”

After filling their plates at the buffet, they went back to the table, and the men entertained Connor while they ate. But eventually the conversation turned to more adult things, taking the focus off his son, and he began to get bored, then to misbehave, testing the last of his patience. When he’d taken all that he could, and it became clear that Connor was incapable of sitting still for a second longer, he leaned over and whispered in his ear.

“It’s time for you to make another choice,” he said, his voice laced with anger. “You can continue sitting here pushing every single one of my buttons, or go over and play with the other kids. I’d suggest that you choose wisely, because you’ve pushed me as far as I’m going to let you. If you keep this up, we’re going to have a problem, a big one.”

The other men fell silent, and Connor looked around the table at them, then jumped down off the chair. "I'll take care of my plate, then go play video games," he said. "Even if you're the meanest dad in the whole world."

Connor stomped off before he could say a word, and he turned away, shaking his head, "Well, there you go," he said. "My sweet, loving son, telling me exactly how he feels."

There was a stunned silence, then Grant cleared his throat, "Connor may not need this group anymore, but you sure do," he said, shaking his head. "That was harsh, but you know he didn't really mean it."

"I know, but that doesn't make it any harder to hear," he said. "I can't have this fight with him every week, and I think he's going to be stubborn about this one."

"I have been thinking about what you said last week," Grant said, then held up his hand. "Now, don't get too excited, but I have a counter-proposal that might solve all your problems, and the rest of the guys think it's a good idea, too."

"I'm listening," he said. "This group is important to me, but not as important as my son."

"I think you can have both if we open the group up to married men," Grant said, then paused to let that sink in. "Just think about it, Noah. We keep losing members because they've gotten married, and frankly, we all miss them. I understand why you started the group for single fathers only, but those men who got married still have something to give, and just imagine how many other fathers it might attract, fathers with kids Connor's age."

"That's a huge leap, Grant," he said. "We're already almost too big to meet here at the diner. I don't see how we could handle more members."

"We could have more meetings," Grant said. "We could have them all over town: the pizza parlor, the bowling alley, the skating rink; there are so many possibilities."

He sat back in his chair, the idea tantalizing, then shook his head, "I was talking about stepping down, not launching a program like this," he said. "I have to spend more time with Connor. Even if he had some kids his own age to hang out with at the meetings, what you're talking about would take a lot of time, time I don't have."

"Which brings us to the next change we want to make," Grant said, looking around the table. "We would all be willing to help, and I'm sure others would too. We need to create a leadership committee or something like

that, have our trusted members help out with the planning. If we share the burden, we could make this happen.”

It only took him a few minutes to make up his mind, “Where do we start?” he asked, a big smile on his face.

“Well, I think any records you have would be helpful,” Grant said. “Then we can move on to brainstorming possible candidates for the committee and new locations.”

“All that stuff is in my truck,” he said, getting to his feet. “I’ll just run out and get it.”

Relief pumping through him, he headed out of the back room, then stopped just as he hit the main dining room when he couldn’t find his keys. “Hey, are my keys on the table?” he called, waving to Grant. “Look next to my coffee cup, I think I set them down there.”

After searching for a second, Grant held them up in triumph, “Thow them,” he called, holding his hand up in the air. “You used to play baseball.”

Grant launched the keys and they landed perfectly in his hand, “Now, that’s what I’m talking about,” he said, punching the air. “I’ll be right back.”

Hailey

Hailey dumped the stack of dirty dishes into the bin under the counter, then took a deep breath before blowing the hair out of her eyes and heading over to the pass-through to look for her next order. The morning hadn’t exactly gone the way Ruth had predicted, but she was getting used to it and for the first time was thriving under the pressure, but she still couldn’t wait for the morning rush to be over. Relieved to see that she didn’t have food waiting for her, she leaned up against the counter and took a long drink from the glass of iced water that she’d stashed there out of desperation a few hours before.

“Phew, it’s been a while since we’ve had a morning like this,” Ruth said, fanning herself with a menu. “I sure hope those girls are really sick, or I’m going to have all their heads.”

“Do you really think they lied?” she asked, a bit shocked. “I mean, all three of them.”

Ruth shook her head, “No, I’m sure they’re all sick, I talked to all of them this morning, and it wasn’t pretty,” she said. “I’m just grumpy and hot.”

“I could try to take a few more tables,” she offered, feeling bad. “I’m

doing great with the three you gave me.”

“That’s a sweet offer, but I think we’d better keep things the way they are,” Ruth said. “Molly is on her way. She should be here any minute; things will get better then.”

It was another hour before she had a chance to catch her breath, but as soon as she leaned against the counter, Ruth came rushing over to her. “We’ve got a problem, well.....it’s not really a problem,” she said, looking more flustered than Hailey had seen her all morning. “The mayor’s wife and her friends are here for one of their milkshake mornings. They do this every once in a while, but it’s usually during the week. You’re going to have to take their table. Mrs. Jenkins isn’t too fond of Molly since she dumped her son in high school.”

She looked over at the door and saw a group of overdressed women looking around the diner with distaste, “No problem, I know exactly how to handle her,” she said. “Those are my kind of people, remember?”

Ruth looked relieved as she hustled away, and only a few minutes later, she walked up to the table of six with a friendly smile. “Good morning, ladies, I’m Hailey, I’ll be taking care of you today,” she said. “Ruth tells me that you’re here for a bit of a treat to brighten up your day, but you’re all so lovely, you’re brightening up everyone else’s day.”

The mayor’s wife looked her up and down, then let out a little humph, “I know you from somewhere,” she said. “Your face is very familiar.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever met before,” she said. “I’m sure I would remember meeting someone as sophisticated as you are.”

“Yes, well, I’m sure I’ll remember,” the woman said, a disapproving look on her face. “You may take our order now.”

Keeping the smile on her face, sure that if she got this table right, she’d have the job she so badly needed, she went back to the shake station and with a little coaching from Molly, started making the order. It felt like it took forever to make the six shakes, and she knew her other tables were missing her, but she finally dumped the last one into the fancy frosted glass, then loaded them all up onto a tray. After sticking a spoon in each, she topped them with whipped cream and a cherry, then stood back for a second to admire her work.

After a quick wipe with a wet cloth, she picked up the tray, ignoring the way her muscles instantly began to scream, and started for the table, praying she didn’t spill the entire thing. It was hard to balance the tray and watch

where she was going, so it was a bit of a shock when she looked up to find Noah standing only a few feet from where the mayor's wife sat, an impatient look on her face. Just looking at his back made her pulse quicken, and a thrill shot through her, and she stumbled just a bit, but managed to rebalance the tray at the last second.

Forcing herself to ignore Noah, she slipped behind him with her back to him, hoping that he wouldn't see her, a second later, he stepped back and turned around at the same time. His elbow caught the edge of the tray, and to her horror, the milkshakes began to slide off, then one by one, and went plopping into Mrs. Jenkins's ample lap and landed upside down. The sound of glass hitting the floor followed, but the scream that came after was what made silence fall over the diner.

"Oh, you clumsy cow," the mayor's wife said, jumping to her feet. "Look what you've done, my clothes are ruined."

The mess in her lap landed on the floor with a plop, and people began to twitter, making the woman's face begin to turn scarlet. "You did that on purpose, you're trying to humiliate me," she cried, then narrowed her eyes at Hailey. "I know who you are now, your Henry Gordon's daughter. I bet he put you up to this; he's hated us since my husband beat him in the election."

"It was an accident," she said. "I swear, I didn't do it on purpose, someone bumped into me."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" Mrs. Jenkins demanded. "You had that all planned out, you little....."

Just then, Ruth came rushing up, interrupting the mayor's wife, "Hailey, why don't you go on into the back," she said, taking her by the shoulders and moving her away from the table. "I'll help Mrs. Jenkins get cleaned up."

She looked over at Noah, who was staring at the mess with a shocked look on his face, hoping that he'd bail her out, but as usual, he just stood there, letting her take the blame. "I'm not getting the job, am I?" she asked.

Ruth looked at her, "I'm sorry, Hailey," she said, shaking her head, "I wish there was something I could do."

Not wanting to embarrass herself by crying, she wound her way through the tables to the front door, pushed it open, and dashed across the street to the park, ignoring the cars honking at her. Heading for the tallest tree she could find, she crawled under the low-hanging branches, leaned up against the trunk, and pulled her knees up to her chest. Rocking back and forth, she began to sob out her anger and frustration, dread spreading through her when

she thought about what the future held for her now that she'd blown her last chance at a job.

CHAPTER 7



NOAH

Noah stood rooted to the spot much longer than he should have. Ruth was already helping Mrs. Jenkins to her feet before he managed to make his mouth work, “It wasn’t Hailey’s fault,” he said. “I ran into her; it would have happened to anyone.”

“Don’t you dare defend her, Noah Russel,” Mrs. Jenkins said, letting Ruth help her toward the bathroom. “She’s just as bad as her father. That whole family should be run out of town, and frankly, I’m surprised to hear you defending her after everything that Henry Gordon has put you through over the last few years.”

Frozen again, he stood watching the two women disappear into the bathroom, then it all clicked in his head: Hailey wasn’t working for the Gordon’s, she was one of them. Wondering how he’d been so stupid, he tried to remember the last time he’d seen her, then felt his body warming as the memory of saving a fourteen-year-old Hailey from drowning in the river washed over him, and had to force himself push it away when his body began to tingle and tighten. Suddenly aware that the other five women were watching him, he backed away from the table and returned to the back room.

Stopping just inside the door, he watched the bathroom door until Ruth and the mayor’s wife came back out. He needed to talk to Ruth, and was a bit confused why the daughter of the richest man in town and his enemy would be trying to get a job as a waitress. As soon as the mayor’s wife was back at her table, he wound his way through the diners, giving her a wide berth, then slipped behind the counter next to Ruth.

She looked over at him and rolled her eyes, “That woman is impossible,” she said. “What do you want?”

“It wasn’t Hailey’s fault,” he said. “You shouldn’t hold it against her, although I’m not sure why she’d need this job, her father should be able to support her.”

Ruth started making a shake and didn’t answer until she’d poured it into a glass, “She’s trying to get away from her father. I don’t exactly know what’s happening between them, but she was very clear that she wasn’t happy with him,” she said. “I’ve heard rumors around town that he’s been using her as bait to hook a big fish who will open up doors for him. He’s had political aspirations for a long time now, but as far as I know, very few supporters. The rumors of the family’s dirty money are still haunting them, but I guess he thinks marrying Hailey off to someone influential will fix that.”

“What exactly do you mean by bait?” he asked, his protective instincts starting to hum. “I don’t like the way that sounds.”

“Marriage is the word on the street,” Ruth said. “But I think Hailey has other plans. I was going to hire her, give her some help. She isn’t anything like her father, you know. But now.....I don’t know, it was bad enough when her father was threatening anyone who hired her, now the mayor’s wife is involved, I’m not sure I want to be in the middle of all that.”

“He’s been threatening people?” he asked. “Why hasn’t anyone reported him?”

“Come on, Noah, you know how far that would go; besides, he hasn’t actually done anything to anyone. They were just threats,” Ruth said, shaking her head. “I tried to help her, but you know how the mayor’s wife is. If I hire her now, she’ll boycott me, and I can’t risk my business. I have bills to pay.”

He made a split-second decision, a choice based purely on what his magic was telling him. “Where did she go?” he asked. “I need to talk to her.”

“Noah, you’re the last person who should get involved in this,” Ruth said, shaking her head. “There’s enough bad blood between you and the Gordons, don’t make it worse.”

“I don’t think I have any choice,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “There’s something about her.....never mind. I just can’t let her go back to that house knowing what will happen to her, I might be the only one who can help her.”

Ruth studied him for a second, then shook her head again, “I just hope you know what you’re doing,” she said. “Henry Gordon is a dangerous man.”

When he finds out you're interfering with his plans, he's going to come after you."

"Let him, I'll be ready," he said. "Do you know where Hailey went?"

Ruth sighed, "She ran out the front door, but she couldn't have gone far," she said. "Her things are still in the back room."

"Thanks, Ruth," he said, leaning over and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Wish me luck."

He raced out the front door and stopped on the sidewalk, looking up and down the block, trying to figure out where Hailey might have gone, then saw the park across the street. When he stepped into the park, he stood scanning the trees, hoping to catch sight of Hailey, but it looked deserted until he spotted a pair of sneakers sticking out from under the bottom of a big tree.

He walked over to the tree, then stopped when he heard her crying, "Hailey, it's Noah, I'm coming in there," he said, then knelt down and crawled through the branches. "I told Ruth that it wasn't your fault. I'm sorry I ran into you; it really was an accident."

Hailey

Noah Russel was the last person she wanted to see right then, "Go away," she spat at him, anger replacing the frustration and fear, instantly drying up her tears. "Don't you think you've done enough to ruin my life? Or are you just coming here to gloat?"

"Hailey, I haven't been trying to ruin your life," he said, crawling under the tree with her. "Everything that happened was an accident. I tried to explain that to everyone, but no one would listen."

"That's funny, because all I remember is you standing there while I took all the blame," she said, then started crawling back out from under the tree, unable to be that close to him. "If I didn't know for sure that my father hates you, I'd think that you were working for him. Just leave me alone Noah, you've already done enough damage. Now I'm going to have to spend tonight being pawed at by gross old men. Do you have any idea what that feels like? No, you wouldn't. You're a man, you're the one doing all the pawing."

As soon as she was clear of the tree branches, she headed for her car, then paused when she realized her keys and purse were in the diner. Unable to face the thought of going back inside to get them, she turned and started for

the gazebo in the middle of the park, hoping Noah would get the message and leave her alone. But he was walking next to her only a few minutes later, his long strides keeping up with her shorter ones easily.

“For what it’s worth, I didn’t even know who you were until just a few minutes ago,” he finally said. “I didn’t make the connection between you and that fourteen-year-old girl I rescued from the river.”

That made her pause for a second and look over at him, “You remember that?” she asked, feeling a little tingle deep in her belly, then shook her head. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. That was a long time ago. I used to think you were a good guy, but now I’m starting to think you’re as bad as my father says you are.”

Noah was silent for a second, then looked over at her, “I don’t think you really believe that,” he said. “But let me just say this; your family has hated mine for a long time. Your grandfather started the feud, but the seeds were planted long before that. Your father doesn’t like me because I beat him at his own game. You might want to ask him about it sometime. As I recall, the whole thing was a bit of an embarrassment to him.”

They’d arrived at the gazebo, and she climbed the steps in silence, then looked over at him, “He never told me why he hated you so much, just that I was supposed to stay away from you and your family. He made it sound like there was something wrong with all of you.”

Noah didn’t answer right away, instead, he walked over to the railing and leaned against it, looking out at the park. “Your father has a narrow view of what’s normal,” he finally said. “There are a few people here in town who agree with him, but not very many. Someday it might be your turn to choose what side you’re on, but that’s not today.”

She threw her hands up in the air, “Well, that just cleared everything up,” she said, turning away from him. “Maybe I’m just fighting fate, maybe I’m meant to marry some old man so my dad can get into politics. I’ll make the perfect wife, after all. I’m pretty, educated, and I come with a big fat bank account, even if it is dirty money. I don’t think I can do this anymore. I can’t keep fighting if it isn’t going to do any good. I’m ashamed to admit that I’m too soft to live in my car, so I guess I should just give up and do what my father wants, it would be so much easier.”

Noah was silent for a second, then he took a deep breath, pushed himself away from the railing, and turned to face her again. “What if I told you there was still a way for you to get away from your father?” he asked. “It’s a crazy

idea, and you might say no, but I need someone to help with Connor. He's been having a rough time of it lately. The woman who usually takes care of the house and Connor for me had to go home to take care of her mother, and she won't be back for months, and well.....I'm having a hard time coping on my own."

It took her a second to understand what he was suggesting, "You want to hire me as your housekeeper?" she finally asked, shaking her head. "I don't know anything about taking care of a house."

"That wouldn't be the main focus of the job," he said. "Connor really needs someone to be there for him, someone watching out for him. You said so yourself that day at the creek. You've got a master's degree in education, and I can't think of better qualifications than that. Besides, he likes you, and so do I. It's the least I can do since I messed up all your other chances at a job."

"I don't know," she said, a rush of emotions making it difficult to think. "This is all happening so fast."

"I'll give you a salary plus room and board," he said. "There's a little cabin on the property not far from the house that you can have. It's not much more than one room, but there's a bathroom and a little kitchen."

A part of her knew that she was exchanging one problem for another; her father would be beyond furious when he discovered where she'd gone, but the alternative was even worse. The thought alone sent a shiver down her spine. Looking up into Noah's eyes she felt the tingle of her attraction to him slowly spreading through her, but under it, a feeling of warmth, and she knew instinctively that he would protect her from her father. Choosing not to look any deeper into what she was feeling, happy just to know that she had a place to go where her father couldn't reach her, it wasn't hard to make up her mind.

"Okay, you've got a deal," she said, smiling up at him. "But this is strictly business. I'm there to take care of Connor, and that's it."

"I would never dream of asking you to do anything more," he said, grinning down at her. "Well, except maybe some laundry and light cleaning. I don't suppose you can cook? I'm terrible at it. Connor refuses to eat the meals I make most nights."

"Hey, you never said anything about housework," she protested. "I think we need to renegotiate my salary."

"I haven't mentioned an amount yet," he said, laughing. "It a bit soon to renegotiate."

“Well then, whatever you were thinking, up it by a couple of dollars,” she said, laughing. “That should cover the menial labor.”

CHAPTER 8



NOAH

Noah realized as goosebumps broke out on his skin that he'd never heard Hailey laugh, "That's the first time I've ever heard you laugh," he said, grinning down at her. "You should do it more often."

"I haven't exactly had a lot to laugh about," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "When I came home, I never dreamed that my life was suddenly going to be turned upside down, and I'm not sure I've had a chance to catch up yet."

"You'll get there," Noah said with authority. "Growing up can be painful, but you seem to be making the right choices."

"You're just saying that because I'm bailing you out," she said, a smile on her face. "Not that there's anything wrong with that; being a single parent is difficult for anyone, and you have a ranch to run also."

"Well, thanks for the pass, but I'm working on making more time for Connor," he said, then realized he'd left him behind. "Oh, no, I forgot about him. He's still back at the diner; he's going to be mad at me, and I don't blame him."

"Then we'd better go back. I'm not looking forward to walking in there, but my purse and keys are in the back room," she said, heading for the stairs. "I feel so bad, Ruth was so nice to me, and I made a mess of everything. I wonder if it would help if I apologized again."

"I don't know, Berta Jenkins isn't a very nice woman," he said. "She's got way more power than she should have just because her husband is mayor. A lot of us are thinking about not reelecting him next term because of her."

But if you want to give it a try, the worst she can do is shut you down.”

When they walked into the diner and Hailey saw the mayor’s wife still sitting at the table in the back, she hesitated for a second, before squaring her shoulders and marching over to her. “You probably don’t want to hear this, but I’m going to say it anyway,” she said. “Dumping that tray of milkshakes on you was an accident. Someone bumped my arm. I didn’t plan to embarrass you, and I’m very sorry that I did. I know that you’re judging me because of my father, and I want you to know that I’m nothing like him. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go start my new job. Please don’t hold what happened here this morning against Ruth, she’s been nothing but kind to me.”

He watched her walk through the silent crowd and disappear into the back room, a funny feeling spreading through his chest, then realized that it was pride. Wondering if he was falling for the feisty little beauty, he stood there for a few minutes, a silly smile on his face, then remembered Connor. To his relief, his son hadn’t even noticed that he’d been gone and was happily playing video games with the other children, but his friends were a different story.

“Where have you been?” Grant asked. “Did you go all the way home or something?”

“I was just cleaning up a little mess I made,” he said, unable to stop smiling. “And in the process, I found someone to help out with Connor.”

There was silence as they all waited for him to say more, “That’s it?” Grant asked. “You’re not going to tell us who it is.”

“Noah, what are you up to?” Jayce asked. “I’ve known you your entire life, and that’s the look you get when you’ve done something you shouldn’t have.”

“We’re not kids anymore, you guys,” he pointed out. “I just hired someone to watch Connor when I can’t. It’s a bit complicated, so we’re trying to keep it quiet for as long as we can.”

“Nothing stays a secret in this town for long, Noah,” Sawyer said. “You might as well tell us; we’re going to find out anyway. Who knows, we might be able to help.”

He leaned over and, keeping his voice low, told them about Hailey and the job he’d offered her, “So, you can see why we’re not exactly broadcasting this all over town,” he finished, sitting back in his seat. “I’m sure I can rely on you all to keep this quiet. I don’t want any more trouble than necessary.”

There was a long silence, “Have you lost your mind?” Grant finally

asked. "Haven't you had enough of fighting with Henry Gordon? Stealing his daughter isn't going to sit well with him."

"I'm not stealing her, she's a grown woman capable of making her own decisions. All I did was give her a job," he said. "You all would have done the same thing in my shoes, so stop looking at me like that."

"We're looking at you like this because we're not used to seeing you doing stupid things because of a woman," Jayce said, eyeing him suspiciously. "You're falling for her, aren't you?"

It took him longer than it should have to answer, "No, of course not," he finally said. "I'm just trying to help her out, and it just so happens it helps me out too."

Grant shook his head, "Tell yourself what you want, but there's more going on here than you're admitting to," he said. "Just promise us that you'll be careful. Henry Gordon has been looking for an excuse to ruin you for years, and this might just tip the scales."

"I know what I'm doing," he said. "And it's a risk I'm willing to take."

Sawyer, who had been silent the entire time, leaned over, "Does she know that you're a shifter?" he asked. "That might be an important piece of information."

"I don't see what difference that makes," he said, his heart sinking when he thought about it. "Since there's nothing going on between us, there's no reason for me to tell her."

"Now, you're lying to yourself and all of us," Sawyer said, shaking his head. "Take my advice and tell her before things go any farther, she deserves to know."

Hailey

Hailey stood looking around her room at the piles of clothes covering all the surfaces, then collapsed into a chair, fighting for air as the room seemed to get smaller. She couldn't get Ruth's words out of her head, and everything around her had begun to take on a sinister cast, from the big four-poster bed with its lace bedspread to the sunny yellow curtains covering the windows. It didn't help to remind herself that she was leaving it all behind. The blood stains went deeper than just the physical things around here. If the story was true, her entire life had been built on money stolen from the dead.

A knock on the door made her jump, "Lunch is ready, Ms. Gordon,"

Kevin called through the door. "We've set you a place in the dining room."

"I'm not feeling very well," she called back, not lying. "I think I'll skip lunch today. I'm sorry you went to all that trouble."

"Very well," Kevin called back. "Ring for me if you need anything."

"Thank you," she called, waiting for his footsteps to retreat.

When she was sure he was gone, she started sorting through the clothes again, discarding most of what her father had bought her since she'd come home, then sat down on the bed with a sigh. She needed to know if the story was true; couldn't move forward until she knew the truth, and she wasn't fool enough to think her father would let her back in the house after what she was about to do. Nor did she have any desire to come back. If she was going to snoop, this would be her only chance.

Scooping up the clothes, she shoved them all in the closet, then straightened up the room in case one of the servants looked in on her, then hurried down the hallway to her father's study. Looking at the big grandfather clock as she passed it by, she calculated that she'd have an hour to find what she was looking for, then realized she had no idea what kind of proof there would be after all of these years. But she'd made it that far, she decided, slipping into the dark paneled room she'd so rarely visited and closing the door quietly behind her.

She stood looking around the room for a few minutes, wrinkling her nose at the smell of old whisky and cigars, then walked over to the desk and began opening the drawers. She worked her way down one side, uncovering only the normal things found in a desk, then started on the other side, disappointed when she found nothing out of the ordinary there either. Discouraged but not ready to give up, she plopped down in her father's chair and looked around the room, trying to see everything from his perspective.

When her eyes landed on a small wooden box tucked into the fancy pen and pencil holder, a little smile spread across her face. It disappeared when all she found was a tiny key inside the box, and she sat back a bit frustrated, feeling like she had to start over again. After combing the room for what felt like hours, she sat back down in the chair, the mystery of the key still unsolved, and closed her eyes, trying to picture what the key might belong to.

It came to her all at once, and she sat up so fast that she banged her knee on the desk, but the smile returned as she slipped under the desk. After searching every inch of its underside, she finally found the little lock set deeply into the back under the bottom drawer. With shaking hands, she

slipped the key into the slot and gave it a gentle twist. A loud clank made her jump, but a little door appeared as the lock disengaged. Wedging her fingernail under the door, she pried it open, not prepared when a little cloth-wrapped bundle dropped to the floor.

Letting out a little scream, she stared at it for a second, then reached out and touched it with the tip of her finger, before picking it up and crawling out from under the desk. Setting it down carefully, she stared at it for a second before reaching out and beginning to unwrap the long pieces of cloth, then sat staring at the beautifully carved wooden box sitting on the desk. She wasn't an expert on languages, but she was pretty sure that the writing that covered the surface looked like Hebrew. Her stomach sank, and for a moment, she thought about just putting it all back where it came from without looking inside.

But her need to know was greater than the fear of what she would find inside, and she slowly lifted the lid, then peered inside, gasping when she saw the pile of rings and broaches inside. Slamming the lid closed, she sat back in the chair, her heart pounding, then sat up again, lifted the lid before she changed her mind, and pulled out a handful of the jewelry.

When she finished inspecting them, she quickly took pictures of each piece of jewelry, placed them back inside the box, and shut the lid with a snap, physically sick. Her hands shook as she rewrapped the box, and she retched several times as she stuffed it back into the desk, sure that she heard the voices of all the people her grandfather had robbed in her head. She left the room, slamming the door behind her, ran back up to her room, stuffed a few things into her backpack, then took the stairs two at a time, desperate to get out of the house and away from the evidence that proved her grandfather was a monster.

CHAPTER 9



NOAH

Noah and Connor were just loading the last of their camping gear into the truck when Hailey's little car came bumping up the driveway and came to an abrupt halt. "Who's that?" Connor asked, throwing his backpack up onto the tailgate. "I thought we were going camping alone."

"We are, but I have a little surprise for you before we go," he said, shoving the tent into the back of the truck. "Let's go see who it is."

When Hailey stepped out of the car, a huge grin spread across Connor's face, "It's Hailey, Dad," he said, starting to run. "Come on, hurry up."

He started after his son at a much slower pace until he got closer, and saw how pale her face was and the way she was trembling. "Hey, what's wrong?" he asked, closing the distance between them in a couple of steps. "You look upset. Did something happen with your father?"

Hailey looked down at Connor, then back up at him and shook her head, "I'm okay, I just got a bit of a shock," she said, managing to smile. "I'm sorry if I'm a little bit early, I just had to get out of that house."

"You said we were going camping alone," Connor said, then looked over at Hailey. "But I guess it's okay if she comes."

"It's still just us. Hailey is here for another reason," he said, still concerned by the haunted look in her eyes. "Let's all go on up to the porch and sit down, I think Hailey could use a drink of water. "Do you think you could get one for her?"

Connor looked up at Hailey, then over at him and squared his shoulders, "You bet," he said, clearly pleased to have been given the responsibility. "I'll

be right back.”

Connor took off for the house at a run, and he put his arm around Hailey, “Come on, it looks like you need to sit down,” he said. “Then you’re going to tell me what happened.”

Tears appeared in her eyes, “I don’t know if I can talk about it,” she said, shaking her head, but letting him guide her up onto the porch. “It’s so awful, and I benefitted from it, and the worst part is, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

He got her into a chair, “Okay, slow down a little,” he said, pulling another chair up next to her. “I’m not following you.”

Hailey took a deep breath, then sat staring at her hands clasped together in her lap, “The money, I was looking for proof of where the money came from,” she said, then fell silent for a second, before taking another deep breath. “I was in my room trying to figure out what to pack, there was so much to sort through. No one should have as many clothes as I do. Anyway, it made me start thinking about where all the money had come from to pay for them all, so I decided to do some snooping. I had to know if the story Ruth told me was true.”

“Hailey, that was all just gossip back then,” he said. “You shouldn’t have put yourself in danger like that, your father would have.....”

“Noah, it’s not just gossip, it really happened,” she said, clearly trying to hold it together. “I found a hidden compartment in my father’s desk. There was a little cloth-wrapped bundle, and it was full of jewelry, rings, broaches, pendants, and bracelets.”

“Lots of people invest in jewels and gold, Hailey,” he said. “I’m not sure that proves anything.”

She shook her head, “Noah, the box I found them in was covered in Hebrew writing, and the jewelry was old,” she said, then shivered. “There were engravings on some of the rings, initials, declarations of love. I know I’m not wrong, none of it was new.....”

“Okay, so that doesn’t look good,” he said, reaching out to take her hands. “But you aren’t responsible for what your grandfather did, Hailey.”

“But I benefitted from it,” she said. “Everything I am is because of that money. How am I supposed to live with that knowledge? How am I supposed to look good, honest people in the eye, knowing that I’ve been living off of other people's sorrow?”

“But you’re not anymore,” he pointed out. “You walked away from all of

it; that's a good place to start."

"That just doesn't seem like enough," she said, shaking her head. "I feel like I should do more, like I have to make up for what my grandfather did."

"That's not your burden to bear," he said, scooting a little closer to her. "You didn't steal that jewelry; you didn't know anything about it until now. You need to give yourself a break."

Just then Connor came out of the house, a tall glass of water in his hands, sloshing a little out as he walked. "I brought the water," he said, setting it down next to Hailey. "I hope this makes you feel better."

Hailey picked up the glass and took a long drink, then smiled at Connor, "Thank you, that helped a lot," she said, then took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I barged in on you both like this, I just.....well.....it was a bit of a shock. I'm okay now, you should go on your camping trip."

"I think we should get you settled first," he said, then looked over at Connor. "If it's okay with you, Hailey is going to take care of you when I can't, at least until Maxine comes back, or you go back to school."

"Really?" he asked, looking between them. "I wanted her to be my teacher, but this is even better."

Hailey laughed through the tears in her eyes, "Thanks, Connor, that also makes me feel a lot better," she said. "I didn't bring much with me, so I just need you to show me where my cabin is, and then you two can go on your camping trip."

He wasn't sure he wanted to leave her alone, "Are you sure you're going to be okay?" he asked. "Is there someone who could come stay with you?"

"She should come with us," Connor said. "It will be fun. We're going to sleep in a tent, eat fish from the river for dinner, and watch the stars come out at night."

"Oh, I don't know, I've never been camping," she said. "And I won't want to intrude on your time with your dad."

"We can still do our hike," Connor said, looking over at him. "Hailey can stay at camp or something."

"It's okay with me," he said. "But Hailey might not want to go, we shouldn't put her on the spot."

Connor looked over at Hailey, "Please say yes, it will be so much more fun if you come," he said. "There's a really pretty lake, and you could read one of the books you were telling me about."

Hailey looked uncomfortable and he opened his mouth to tell her it was

okay to say no, but then she shrugged her shoulders, “The truth is, I don’t really have any clothes or anything right now. I just shoved a few things into my backpack and left,” she said. “I’m going to have to spend the weekend trying to get some new clothes and stuff together.”

“Well, then that won’t be a problem,” he said. “We’re going to run into Monroe for some fishing gear, we could drop you off anywhere you want, and if you need an advance on your salary, I’m sure we could figure something out.”

“I’m okay for money, I’ve got an emergency fund saved up. It’s not much. I was going to use it for the deposit on an apartment, but now.....” her words trailed off, then a smile spread across her face. “Okay, you talked me into it.”

Connor started jumping up and down, “I’ll go get Hailey a sleeping bag,” he said, running for the steps. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Hailey

Grabbing her backpack from Noah, she slung it onto her back, then held her hands out for something else. “Maybe you should just carry your backpack,” he said. “It’s a bit of a hike to the lake, and we’ll have to make a second trip anyway.”

“Noah, I can take something else,” she said, holding her hands out again. “I’ve been carrying backpacks much heavier than this around for years, I’ll be fine.”

“Fine, you can carry the tent,” he said, dropping it into her arms. “But if you get tired, be sure and say something. You have to reserve your strength up here.”

She rolled her eyes at him, “I’ve been in the mountains before,” she said. “I grew up here too.”

“But you’ve never been to our lake,” Connor said, running up and taking her hand. “Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

Looking back over her shoulder as Connor led her toward the path, she raised her eyebrows at Noah in a silent question, and he shrugged his shoulders, “It’s part of the ranch,” he said. “No one comes up here but us.”

They followed the path through the trees for about a half a mile, then emerged into a clearing with a crystal blue lake and an old, dilapidated cabin. “Oh, this is beautiful, exactly what you think of when you think of Montana,”

she said, turning in a circle to take in the high mountain peaks around them. “It makes me feel like we’re the only people on Earth.”

Noah laughed, “That’s one of the reasons we come up here,” he said. “Sometimes it’s nice to forget everything and get away, and you can’t get more away than this. I hope you’re up for roughing it a little. There aren’t any bathrooms or running water, I should have warned you.”

“Contrary to what you might think of a rich girl like me, I’ve done a little roughing it,” she said. “I’ve spent every summer since I went to college doing volunteer work in some very underdeveloped places. I’m no stranger to the lack of bathrooms or running water.”

Noah looked like he didn’t believe her but shrugged his shoulders, “Okay, if you say so,” he said, then grinned at her. “Maybe we’ll let you dig the latrine then.”

“Now, that might be taking it too far,” she said, laughing. “How about if I’m in charge of gathering wood and getting a fire started.”

“That’s a deal,” Noah said. “Come on, camp is just a little further.”

She could see Connor further down the shore already shrugging off his backpack, “Lead on,” she said, falling into step behind him, but when they walked by the old cabin, she hesitated. “This must have been a wonderful place to live. Whose cabin was this?”

“That cabin was the first improvement on this land after the governor gave it to my family about four generations back,” he said. “They lived up here for a long time before moving down into the valley. It would have been hard living up here, but the lake would have been an important source of both water and food.”

She stopped and studied the cabin, trying to imagine what it must have been like, “Is it safe to go inside?” she asked. “I would love to look around.”

“It’s still fairly sound, but you’d better wait until I can go with you,” he said. “There are a few tricky places, and I haven’t been inside for a couple of years, so they could have gotten worse. The last thing I need is you hurt.”

“Yeah, then I couldn’t save your butt,” she said, grinning at him, then felt her cheeks turning pink. “I mean.....I couldn’t.....never mind.....I shouldn’t have mentioned your butt.”

Groaning because she’d only made it worse, “Pretend I didn’t say that,” she said. “We’d better catch up to Connor.”

A look appeared on Noah’s face that made her heart start beating just a little faster, “I guess we should,” he finally said, then leaned a little closer.

“But just for the record, I don’t mind you saving my butt, or any other part of me for that matter.”

He was walking away before she could catch her breath or recover from the punch of desire that left her entire body humming, and she was forced to follow along behind him a few minutes later, her cheeks a bright shade of pink. Doing her best to keep her eyes off his butt as he walked in front of her, she forced herself not to think about the kiss they’d shared, and reminded herself that she was working for him now.

It was wrong and completely unprofessional to even be thinking the things she was, but who could blame her when Noah started it? Anyone else would have reacted the same way. She was only human, after all, and he’d been nothing but kind to her. If that had inflamed her old crush on him, she wasn’t to blame, but she would be if she acted on it. Deciding that her only choice was to avoid being alone with him, she followed him into camp and put as much distance between them as she could.

It was easy to avoid him as they set up camp, got the fire started, and made dinner, but as the sun began to set on the long summer day, she realized that it wouldn’t be long before Connor would be going to bed. He was already half asleep leaning up against Noah, fighting to keep his eyes open, and she wondered if she could get away with going to bed when he did. But the stars had come out, the fire was pleasantly warm, and she hated to end the evening early just because she was afraid to be alone with Noah.

It wasn’t like anything was going to happen. He wouldn’t dare kiss her again, not now that she was working for him, so when he got up and lifted a sleeping Connor into his arms, she stayed right where she was. After Noah disappeared into the tent, she got up and put more wood on the fire, then settled back down with a contented sigh, and tipped her head up to watch the stars. She was still staring into the night sky when Noah came back, sat down next to her without saying a word, and looked up at the light show above their heads.

CHAPTER 10



NOAH

Noah climbed out of his sleeping bag at the first signs of dawn the next morning, slipped out of the tent and walked over to the still-smoldering fire, gave the coals a good stir, then brought it back to life with fresh wood. After putting a pot of coffee together, he carried it over to the fire and wedged it between two rocks, then walked down to the lake and stood watching the sun slowly brightening the sky. By the time the sun was just beginning to peek over the mountains, the coffee was perking, and the tantalizing smell drew him back to camp.

After filling a travel cup, he put it back on the fire to stay warm, then choose a fishing pole, and was making his first cast just as the first rays of light hit the water. Only seconds later, he was pulling a fat silvery fish onto the bank. Three more followed before he decided there was enough for breakfast. Reeling the pole in, he set it aside and sat down on the bank, sipping his coffee as he watched the animals and insects slowly come to life with the day's warmth.

His mind wandered to Hailey, as it always did lately, and he wondered if he was playing with fire by hiring her to watch Connor. It had been a split-second, in-the-moment kind of decision, but it had come from deep in his gut, and he'd learned a long time ago not to ignore those kinds of feelings. It was more than clear to anyone that Hailey didn't deserve what her father had planned for her, and he wasn't about to stand by and do nothing if there was another way. But he knew it wasn't just that; there was something about her that he was drawn to, a sweetness and innocence that was backed up with

some serious guts.

He smiled, remembering the way she stood up to the mayor's wife, and winced, thinking about all the danger she'd put herself in trying to find out the truth about her family. She was more than just a pretty face, and he knew that he was slowly falling under her spell, a sure recipe for disaster, but he couldn't seem to stop himself, and wasn't sure he even wanted to. He hadn't felt this alive in a long time, and unlike the feeling he'd had when he'd met Connor's mother, this felt right, like it was meant to be.

"Dad, how long have you been up?" Connor asked from behind him. "Did you go fishing without me?"

"Just a little," he said, sending his son an apologetic look. "I woke up early and couldn't resist. I've probably got enough for breakfast, but if you want to throw a hook in, I'm sure we could manage to eat one more."

Connor was down the bank in seconds, "I'm going to catch the biggest one," he said, picking up the pole. "And then I'm going to eat it."

He laughed, "Are you going to cook it too?" he asked. "Because I think you missed a step."

"Dad....." Connor said, rolling his eyes. "I'm only seven, you won't let me cook."

"Oh, that's right, I guess you'll just have to eat it raw," he teased. "You like sushi, don't you?"

"Gross, Dad," he said, then smiled. "I'll just ask Hailey to cook it for me."

"Oh, you think so, huh?" he asked. "Was she awake when you came down here?"

"She poked her head out from inside the sleeping bag when I got up," Connor said with a shrug. "She mumbled something about coffee, then pulled the covers back over her head."

"Let me help you get that pole in the water, and then I'll go check on her," he said, getting to his feet. "Will you be okay down here by yourself?"

That got him an eye roll, "I'm not a baby, Dad, I know to stay back from the water," he said. "Besides, I know how to swim, and the lake isn't that deep."

"But it's cold, don't forget that," he said, putting a worm on the hook. "That makes a difference."

"I'll be careful, I promise," Connor said, taking the pole from him. "Watch this, I've been practicing at home."

With an expert flick of his wrist, his son sent the hook flying out into the water, “That’s a fish-worthy cast,” he said. “I’m impressed. Now we just need the fish to go with it.”

When he was sure that Connor wasn’t going to need him, he went back to camp, stirred the fire, then added more wood, listening for sounds of movement from inside the tent, but he heard only the sounds of breathing. Draining the last of the coffee from the pot into his cup, he started a new one, then began gathering the things he would need to cook breakfast, deciding to let Hailey sleep a little longer. She’d been through a lot in the last week, some of it his fault, and some extra rest could only help, especially since her father and his anger loomed large in their future.

Looking over at the lake, he watched Connor for a while, still a bit nervous about the talk they’d had to have on the hike later that day. He knew the cave would help him explain, but he was still afraid he’d screw it up. Connor knew that he was different, knew that Noah was part of a group of people he called their clan, but that was all he understood. He’d been sheltered, like all kids, from the full truth. Thinking about his reaction made him wonder if it had been a good idea to bring Hailey with them, but he couldn’t change that now. He’d just have to hope that Connor wasn’t upset when he learned about the magic flowing through his blood.

Hailey

Snuggled down in her sleeping bag warm and comfortable, Hailey was drifting in and out of sleep, telling herself that she should get up, but couldn’t make herself move. The sun was already lighting up one side of the tent, and it wouldn’t be long until it became too hot to stay inside; plus the sound of the fire crackling was as tempting as the smell of coffee drifting to her on the breeze. Letting out a groan, she threw back the sleeping bag, then pulled it back over her when the cold air made contact with her warm skin.

She was just gathering herself to make another attempt when a scream broke the silence, “Help, help,” Connor called, followed by the sound of splashing. “Dad, where are you? I need help.”

There were more screams, followed by more splashing, and then everything went silent for a second before Connor started screaming again. She bolted out of the tent to find Connor down by the lake splashing around in the water, a panicked look on his face, screaming at the top of his lungs for

his father. Noah was standing by the fire, an amused look on his face, but wasn't making a move to help his son, who was still splashing around in the lake, clearly drowning.

Ripping off her sweatshirt, she ran down to the lake in her bare feet and dove into the water, only to find herself lying in the mud, a huge fish slapping her in the face with its tail. Sputtering and trying to catch the fish, she rolled around in the water until her hands finally closed around the slippery body, and she was able to stop it from thrashing. Getting carefully to her feet, she lifted the fish, but just as she started for the bank, it began to squirm again and slipped right out of her hands back into the water.

She made a grab for the fish, but it slipped through her fingers. She lost her balance and landed in the mud again, but didn't get up this time because Noah was there scooping the fish up with a net. He was laughing so hard he could barely breathe, and she felt herself beginning to blush with embarrassment, especially when she realized she was sitting there in her bra. Getting up on her hands and knees, she tried to stand up, but the mud held her fast, and Noah finally had to give her a hand.

"That was some rescue," he said. "I guess I should have told you about the net."

Hailey gave him a dirty look, "I thought Connor was drowning," she said, stomping out of the lake, ignoring the mud sliding off her skin and plopping into the water. "You could have said something as I went running by you. Now look at me, and all for a stupid fish."

That woke Connor up, "Hey, it's not a stupid fish," he said, scowling at her. "It's the biggest fish I've ever caught."

She stopped at the edge of the lake and turned back to Connor, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult your fish," she said, some of her annoyance draining away. "I'm just embarrassed that I didn't realize that's what was going on."

"It was nice of you to try to save me, and you did almost have the fish," Connor said, his face full of happiness again. "I'll let you have a bite if you want."

"That's a deal, but I think I'd better get cleaned up first," she said, then forced herself to look over at Noah. "Any suggestions, since I know a shower is out?"

"There's a place further along the shore where it gets deeper," Noah said, trying to not smile. "But you might want to try and wash some of that off

first.”

“Gee, you think so?” she asked, then stuck her tongue out at him. “I’m blaming you for all of this. You know, if you’d just said something……”

“Then you wouldn’t be getting a morning swim,” he finished for her. “I promise there will be coffee and breakfast when you get back.”

“There had better be,” she said, splashing herself with the freezing water to get rid of most of the mud. “And I’m not eating that fish.”

When she came back to camp half an hour later, she was mud-free and smelled like the soap that Noah had shoved at her as she went by. “You smell like fish,” he said, a grin on his face. “This might help.”

Noah opened his mouth when he saw her, but she shook her head, “Don’t talk to me until I have some coffee,” she said, grabbing a cup. “Just do whatever you were doing and ignore me.”

It didn’t take long for the coffee to work its magic, and she started to feel more human, “Breakfast is ready: fried fish, scrambled eggs, and toast,” Noah called. “Connor, you come make your plate first and let Hailey have a taste of that fish you caught.”

She started to decline, but the look of pride on Connor’s face stopped her, “I’d love a little bite,” she said. “I have to get even with the fish somehow.”

Connor laughed, “Hailey, that’s silly,” he said. “He didn’t do it to you on purpose.”

“It sure felt personal to me,” she said, giving the fish a wary look when Connor brought it over to her. “Does it have a lot of bones?”

“You just have to know how to eat it right,” Connor said, handing her the plate. “Here, I’ll show you.”

To her surprise, the fish was better than she’d imagined, and when Connor walked away, there was nothing left on the plate but bones. “Don’t say a word,” she said, getting to her feet and shooting Noah a dirty look. “A girl is allowed to change her mind. I’ll wash the dishes if you show me how.”

He laughed, “You’re full of surprises, Hailey,” he said, grinning at her. “How about we do the dishes together?”

CHAPTER 11



NOAH

Noah tucked the last of the picnic lunch into his backpack, then stood up and looked around camp to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Satisfied they were ready, he zipped the pack up and carried it over to where Connor was waiting for him, a look of anticipation on his face. Ruffling his son's hair, he set the pack down, then walked over to Hailey and waited until she finished drying the last plate from their breakfast.

"We're all ready to go," he said. "Are you sure you'll be okay here by yourself all day?"

"I'll be just fine. I've got a list of chores to do, then I'm going to take my book down by the lake, find some shade, and read all afternoon," she said. "You two go on, don't worry about me. I'll be right here when you get back."

Still feeling a little guilty, he and Connor set off on the trail that led behind the lake into the mountains, but it was a beautiful day, and the feeling soon melted away. They'd been hiking for an hour when they came to a fork in the trail. Connor, who was in the lead, started to take the right fork, but he stopped him and gestured to the other trail.

"We're going this way today," he said. "There's a cave I want to show you."

"A cave?" Connor asked, excitement in his voice. "I didn't know we had a cave too."

He laughed, "We have several on our land," he said, "but this is a special one."

"What makes it so special?" Connor asked, looking up at him. "Is it

magical?”

“A little bit,” he said, surprising his son. “You’ll just have to see for yourself.”

Connor studied him for a second, clearly trying to gauge if he was kidding, “Okay,” he finally said, then started down the new trail. “But I think you’re teasing me; caves can’t be magic.”

They reached the entrance to the cave just in time for lunch, so they spread their food out on a grassy area in front, “We’ll go explore after we’ve eaten,” he told Connor, unloading his pack. “It’s important to keep eating and drinking when you’re up here. It takes a lot of energy to hike.”

But he didn’t need to give his son a lecture, “I’m starving, Dad,” he said, plopping down next to him. “What did you bring to eat?”

Pleased that he wasn’t going to have to fight with Connor, they settled down and began to eat, but a few minutes later, his son set his sandwich down and looked around. “Do you hear that?” he asked. “It sounds like something is humming. A bee hive, or, I don’t know.....?”

“I don’t think so,” he said, shaking his head. “Finish your sandwich, and I’ll tell you a story.”

Connor picked up his food and took a giant bite, “I like it when you tell stories,” he said with his mouth full. “Yours are always the best.”

He gave Connor a look, then shook his head, deciding to ignore the bad manners, “Okay, this story takes place a long time ago, way before either of us were born. It’s about a group of people who had been searching for a long time for the perfect place to settle and raise their families,” he said, making himself more comfortable. “When they finally found Prospect, they knew they’d arrived at the place they were supposed to be, and part of the reason is the cave I’m about to show you.”

“So, it is special,” Connor said, pumping his fist in the air. “I knew it.”

Noah smiled, “And so were the people who came here. You see, they were different than most people,” he said. “And when they found this cave, they understood that this would be a safe place for them to settle, that the power that flowed through this land would not only sustain them, it would protect them.”

“Power?” Connor asked, his face scrunched up in confusion. “You mean like electricity?”

“No, a different kind of power, one that you feel deep inside you,” he said, putting a hand over Connor’s heart. “I usually feel it right here first.”

Connor's eyes got big, "Dad, are you talking about magic?" he asked. "Are you saying....."

"Those people who came here, they were our ancestors," he said. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"I think so. They're our old old old relatives," he said. "What was wrong with them?"

"There was nothing wrong with them. In fact, they'd been given a gift," he said. "The same gift that still runs through our blood, and I hope you'll be as thankful for it as I am in time, even if it's not always easy to be who we are."

"I don't think I want to be different," Connor said, his bottom lip beginning to tremble. "The kids will make fun of me."

"No, they won't, half of the kids in your class come from families just like ours," he said. "And the rest of them will never know. This is a secret we all keep because regular people don't always understand about our gift."

Connor thought about that for a second, then looked up at him, "You keep calling it a gift," he said. "I don't understand what that means."

"I think it's time we went inside the cave," he said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand. "It might make a little more sense to you when we do."

Connor put his hand in his, and together they walked out of the bright sunlight into the dim interior of the cave, where the humming sound was growing louder. "I hear it again," Connor whispered, looking around him. "Why is the cave singing?"

"It sounds more like humming to me," he said, grinning down at him. "Why don't you go take a look around? I've got a flashlight in my pocket, but I think if you try hard enough you won't need one."

Looking a bit uncertain, Connor took a few steps away from him, then saw the pictures painted on the walls of the cave, and his curiosity took over. After he wandered around the entire cave, studying the paintings, he came back over to Noah, a look of wonder on his face, his cheeks pink with excitement.

"These people are turning into wolves," he said. "Is that the gift you were talking about? Can you turn into a wolf? I want to see you do it."

"Okay, slow down," he said, shaking his head. "First of all, yes, that is the gift I'm talking about, and I can turn into a wolf, but I'm not going to do that right now."

"Can I turn into a wolf?" Connor asked, his eyes wide. "That would be so

cool, I want to do it right now.”

“You’re still a bit too young for that, but the change is starting to happen to you,” he said, kneeling down in front of him. “When the time comes for the wolf inside us to awaken, it happens very slowly. At first, we just start thinking like the wolf, and that can be a problem.”

Connor studied the ground in front of him, then looked up at him again, “I haven’t meant to be bad,” he said. “I just can’t help myself sometimes.”

“It’s just the wolf inside you trying to get out, you’re feeling the wolf’s instincts, and sometimes those feelings don’t quite work in the world we live in,” he said. “But the good news is, there are lots of ways to control those feelings, and I’m going to teach you a few of them today.”

Hailey

Hailey spread a blanket under the biggest tree that she could find, the shade a relief from the heat of the day, and settled down with her lunch. Instead of opening her book, she sat watching the lake as she ate, enjoying the sparkle of the water and the sound of the wind rustling the leaves of the trees, truly understanding for the first time the power of nature.

She’d always enjoyed being outside, riding her horse, walking the many paths of the university, or just sitting in the park with her lunch when she had a break from classes. But being here, miles away from anyone, she felt herself recharging, felt the stress and anxiety of the last few weeks melting away as Mother Nature worked her magic. It helped that she had a job, a way to get away from her father, even if that added a new and different complication to her life.

Not so much a complication, she thought, shifting her attention up into the trees where the birds flitted from branch to branch, calling out to their mates; more of a distraction really. Noah had kissed her once, long before she started working for him, and if he teased and flirted with her, he probably did that with all women, it was silly to read too much into any of it. She was a grown woman, capable of handling something as simple as a crush with maturity and professionalism. It wouldn’t interfere with the job she was there to do.

Feeling even better than she had before she sat down, she looked back at the lake with a long sigh and turned to put the rest of her lunch away, but a glimpse of something white moving through the trees caught her attention.

Frozen in mid-movement, she slowly lowered her arms down into her lap when a white wolf came out of the trees and trotted down the bank of the lake across from her. Afraid to move, she watched the wolf drink its fill before taking a few steps away from the water and sitting down on a patch of grass.

She watched the wolf from across the water for several minutes, a bit frightened by the huge predator, but even more curious to see what it would do when it noticed her. When the moment came and the wolf finally looked over at her, it didn't move, didn't even seem to be alarmed that she was there in its territory. Instead, the wolf nodded its head at her in a human gesture, then yawned, opening its huge mouth so she could see the rows of sharp teeth that lined the wolf's mouth, clearly perfectly fine with her being there.

She shivered in the heat of the day, the sheer power of the creature palpable even from across the water, but the wolf just lay down with its head between its enormous paws and closed its eyes. Shocked this time, she sat watching the wolf for a long time, but as the minutes ticked away, she felt herself growing drowsy, and finally lay down on the blanket. Telling herself that she'd only close her eyes for a second, she gave in and fell asleep in only minutes, and it was several hours before the sound of Noah and Connor's voices woke her.

"Hailey, are you here?" Noah called; his voice full of concern. "We're back from our hike."

"Maybe she went to gather wood or something," Connor said. "I'm sure she's fine, Dad."

She sat up and looked around, confused for a second, then spotted the patch of grass where the wolf had been lying and jumped to her feet, a feeling of loss settling over her when she saw that it was gone. For a second, she thought that it had been a dream, and she stood staring at the other side of the lake, then shook her head, the certainty that it hadn't been a dream settling over her.

"There she is, Dad," Connor said, his voice already getting closer. "Over here by the lake."

They were both suddenly by her side, and she forced herself to look away from the other bank, "Are you okay?" Noah asked, his face full of concern. "You look a little confused."

"I'm okay. I was asleep when you got back, sorry," she said, then looked back across the lake. "Would you think I'm crazy if I said that I saw a white wolf on the other side of the lake?"

Noah didn't answer right away, and she looked over at him to find him giving Connor a warning look. "Well, maybe not," he said. "But are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

"No, I'm sure I wasn't dreaming, I was just finishing my lunch when it came out of the trees," she said. "It took a long drink of water, then laid down and went to sleep over there in that patch of grass. I know I didn't dream it; I just know it."

Noah was silent for so long she began to think he didn't believe her, "There are lots of legends about white wolves, and we have a few of our own around here," he finally said. "Let's go back to camp and I'll tell you about them."

She took one more look across the lake, telling herself that she wasn't crazy, she'd seen the wolf, felt its incredible power, and she'd never forget it for the rest of her life. Looking over at Noah, she nodded, then began gathering up the blanket, her book, and the rest of her lunch, still a bit rattled by the entire experience. Noah took the blanket, Connor took the bag with her lunch, and together the three of them climbed up from the lake to the campsite.

CHAPTER 12



NOAH

Noah pushed Hailey down onto the log by the fire, grabbed the coffee pot, and poured her a cup, “Here, drink this,” he said, shoving the cup into her hands. “It will make you feel better.”

She took a sip, “I don’t feel bad, just a little.....shocked,” she said. “I mean, I know what I saw, and it doesn’t make sense. That wolf just laid down right there by the lake and took a nap, that’s not normal. Is it?”

“Not for a normal wolf, but if you believe the legends, there was nothing normal about what you saw,” he said, sitting down next to Hailey. “A lot of cultures have stories about white wolves. They’re usually magical creatures, most often shifters, capable of changing from human to animals and back at will. The white wolf is considered the most powerful of them all, the father of all wolf shifters if the legends are true, and he only appears when someone needs help, or they’re going to be asked to believe in the legends.”

Hailey took a sip of her coffee, then looked over at him, “Maybe I was dreaming,” she said, shaking her head. “Because what you’re telling me sounds like a dream or a story from a fairy tale. I wasn’t in any danger, Noah, I was just sitting by the side of the lake eating my lunch. There was no one but me here.”

He hesitated for a second, “I wasn’t going to tell you this, but Connor and I saw signs that a bear was on the other side of the lake on our way back from our hike,” he said. “I don’t think we have anything to worry about, there’s plenty of food for the bears right now, and it was probably just passing through, but we’re going to take a few extra precautions tonight in case it's

still in the area.”

Hailey was silent for a long time, “You think the wolf was protecting me, don’t you?” she asked, then shook her head. “You can’t really believe that, you’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“No, he’s not,” Connor said. “Those legends are true.....we can prove it to you.”

“I think that’s enough,” he said, getting to his feet. “Legend or not, we need to remember that we’re visitors here and act accordingly. Now, who wants to go fishing?”

Hailey seemed surprised by his sudden change of subject but didn’t say anything. She had a grateful look on her face, but her eyes were still full of confusion. He wished more than anything that he could tell her, but knew that could be a mistake, especially out here, miles from civilization. The white wolf had appeared to Hailey for a reason. It might have been to protect her from the bear, it might have been to give her a little nudge in the right direction or to tell him what he already knew. Only time would tell, so for now he’d keep his silence.

“I think I’ll just hang out here by the fire,” Hailey said. “You two go on ahead. My little swim with the fish this morning was enough for me for one day.”

Connor looked disappointed, but he gave him a look, “Okay, but if you change your mind, we’ve got an extra fishing pole,” he said, then jumped to his feet. “I’ll get the worms.”

Once they were settled on the bank and both had their lines in the water, Connor looked over at him, “Dad, it feels wrong not to tell Hailey the truth,” he said. “I mean, aren’t we kind of lying to her?”

“I guess you could call it a lie of omission,” he said, then saw the confusion on Connor’s face. “Okay, let me see if I can explain it better. Just because we know that the white wolf and shifters are real, that doesn’t mean we have to tell Hailey. By hiding the truth from her, we’re protecting her. Regular humans don’t always accept what we are, and since we don’t know Hailey very well, right now it’s better not to tell her.”

Connor sighed, “This is all so confusing,” he said. “How do you know who to tell and who not to?”

“Right now, you shouldn’t tell anyone,” he said. “But with time, you’ll come to understand who else in town is like us, who knows about us and doesn’t care, and the few who hate us for what we are.”

“And the rest?” he asked. “What about them?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “There are a few people in town who never figure it out. We don’t exactly advertise what we can do,” he said. “A few times over the years someone has found out and moved away, but mostly we manage to live in peace with the regular humans in Prospect, and you will too.”

Connor was silent for a long time, “Is that what happened to my mother?” he finally asked, his voice barely a whisper. “Did she find out what we are and leave?”

It took him a second to answer, the pain in his son’s voice making it hard to speak for a second, “Connor, what happened between your mother and me was complicated,” he said. “Grownups sometimes make the wrong decision. Your mother thought she wanted something, then discovered it wasn’t what she wanted at all. It wasn’t your fault, or mine for that matter. I wish I could tell you that she wasn’t bothered by me being a shifter, but the truth is, I think it scared her. I don’t think she was able to see it for the gift that it is. I’m sorry she’s not here for you. I wish more than anything I could change that, but you’ve still got me, and I’ll never abandon you. You’re stuck with me for a long time.”

“Do you think she’ll ever come back?” Connor asked, his face full of sadness. “I mean, it could happen, right?”

“I suppose, but I don’t want you to get your hopes up,” he said. “I haven’t heard from her since she left.”

He hated to see the disappointment on his son’s face, but knew that lying to him would only come back to haunt him in the future. “I guess you’re right,” Connor finally said, putting on a brave face. “And we’re better off without her anyway.”

Hailey

Hailey carefully stirred the pot on the fire, taking a deep breath of the fragrant steam that floated up to her, then put the heavy lid back on with a satisfied smile. She’d never had much of an opportunity to cook, and had either lived alone or in a dorm room with a cafeteria, but she’d managed to pick up enough from the cooking shows on television to put together a pot of stew from the ingredients in camp. Wishing she had a loaf of crusty bread to go with it, she added a few more logs to the fire, then looked over at the lake

shore where Connor and Noah were still fishing.

Dropping back down onto the log, she stared into the fire, thinking about the white wolf, still confused about its appearance, unable to make the leap Noah wanted her to make. Of course, it had occurred to her that he might be playing a joke on her, might be egging her on, and a little part of her hoped that it was true. It would be much easier to find out that he was teasing her than to believe that magic was real and wolves could turn into humans.

“Something smells good,” Connor said, walking up and scaring her. “I’m tired of fishing, and my dad fell asleep.”

“I was just sitting here wishing I could get my hands on some bread to go with it,” she said, patting the spot on the log next to her. “Come sit down and wish with me, maybe that will make it come true.”

“That’s silly,” Connor said, a frown on his face, but sat down next to her and crossed his arms over his chest. “You can’t wish for bread, just like you can’t wish for a mother.”

She sat perfectly still for a second, caught completely off guard, “No, I guess you can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry that you’re missing your mom.”

Connor didn’t say anything for a long time, just stared into the flames, his face full of misery, “She left me, you know,” he finally said. “When I was three, she decided that she didn’t want to be my mom. Dad says it wasn’t my fault, but I know it was.”

“Oh, Connor, I’m sure that’s not true,” she said, gathering him into her arms. “I’m sure she had some very good reasons for leaving, but I’m sure you weren’t one of them.”

“That’s what my dad said, too,” he said, looking up at her. “It just sucks being one of the only kids without a mother, it messes up all kinds of things, and the kids make fun of me sometimes. It wouldn’t be so bad if she’d died or something, then at least they couldn’t tease me about it. That’s bad, huh?”

“Well, I guess we shouldn’t wish anyone dead, but I think I understand what you mean,” she said. “My mother died when I was about your age, and none of the kids would have dared tease me about it.”

Connor was silent for a second, then looked up at her, “I’m sorry your mother died,” he finally said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

She smiled down at him, “That’s okay,” she said. “It must be really hard for you not to know where your mom is; at least I knew mine was never coming back.”

“Dad doesn’t think she’ll ever come back,” he said with a sigh. “But I

can't stop myself from hoping that she will."

"There will always be a small part of you that misses her," she said. "But with time it will get easier, and it's not like you're alone; you have a lot of people around you who love you. The trick, I think, is to fill the space that your mother left with other people. Family is important, but blood isn't everything, Connor, there are lots of people in your life who love you as if you were family. Those are the people who are important."

Connor was silent for a long time, and she wondered if he understood what she'd said, but then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. "I'm glad you're in my life now," he said. "I don't feel as sad anymore."

She smiled and returned the hug, "I'm glad I'm here too," she said, then pulled back and looked down at him. "Now, what are we going to do about that bread I was wishing for?"

Connor perked up, "Dad makes biscuits in the big frying pan sometimes. He learned to do it in this stupid group he started for single dads," he said. "I bet I could show you how he does it."

"That sounds kind of hard," she said. "But I'm willing to give it a shot."

Connor jumped up, "Dad will be so surprised," he said. "I hope he doesn't wake up yet."

She followed Connor over to the area they used as a kitchen, "Tell me more about this group of your dads," she said, unable to help herself. "You sound like you don't like it very much."

"I used to, but I'm too old. All the other kids are just babies, there's no one my age," he said. "Dad still has to go because he put the group together. I guess it helps a lot of people, but every time I make a new friend, his dad goes off and gets married, and he stops coming to the meetings."

"I can see how that might be a problem," she said. "Have you talked to your dad about this?"

"Yeah, he says he's coming up with a plan to fix things," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "But I still have to go to those stupid Saturday meetings until he figures it out."

"Well, at least he's trying; that's a lot more than my father does for me," she said, then wished she hadn't. "My father and I don't really get along, but that's not something you should worry about. Come on, show me how to make those biscuits. If we're going to surprise your dad, we'd better get to work."

CHAPTER 13



NOAH

Noah woke to the smell of food, opened his eyes, and sat up in the chair, nearly dumping himself and his fishing pole into the lake in the process. Righting the chair, he got to his feet, reeled the pole in and set it on the bank, then followed the smell of food back to camp, his stomach growling loudly. Hailey was carrying the big frying pan with both hands when he crested the bank, a look of intense concentration on her face, and a wave of desire washed over him.

“Hey, something smells great,” he said when the skillet was safely off the fire. “What have you two been up to? I swear I smell biscuits.”

“And you would be right,” Hailey said, grinning at him. “Connor showed me how to bake them in the skillet. I hope they’re done all the way through.”

“I told her to take them off early since they keep cooking because the pan is still hot,” Connor said proudly. “I remembered you doing that.”

“And you were right,” he said, smiling at his son and ruffling his hair. “I smell something else besides biscuits, and it’s making my stomach growl.”

Hailey lifted the lid off the big pot and fanned the steam at him, “I made stew,” she announced. “And it’s not half bad, if I do say so myself.”

“Well, then, let’s eat,” he said. “It’s nice to have someone else do the cooking for a change. I’ll do the dishes when we’re done.”

The stew and biscuits disappeared quickly as the sun set behind the mountains, casting the little camp into darkness, but he added more wood to the fire, chasing away the shadows and the chill in the air. When everyone had their fill, he cleaned up, then joined Hailey and a sleepy Connor over by

the fire. He let out a satisfied sigh before making himself comfortable with his back against the log.

It wasn't long before Connor's eyelids began to grow heavy, and he started yawning, "It looks like you should have taken a nap today, too," he said, putting his arm around his son and pulling him closer. "We had a big day."

"It was fun, though," Connor said. "I wish we didn't have to go home tomorrow."

"Me too, but I'm afraid tomorrow is Monday, and they need me at the ranch," he said. "We'll make time to come up here again, I promise."

"And Hailey can come too," Connor said, then yawned. "She has to come."

"We'll have to see about that," he said, looking over at Hailey. "She might have other things she wants to do."

Connor didn't answer because he was sound asleep, a little smile on his face, "Well, I guess I should put him to bed," he said. "Poor guy, he's exhausted."

When he came back, Hailey had added more wood to the fire and poured him a cup of coffee, "I fixed it the way you like it, just a little milk and sugar," she said, handing it to him. "I figured you probably weren't ready for bed after that nap you had this afternoon."

"No, I'll be up for hours now, but you don't have to stay up with me," he said. "I don't mind being out here by myself."

"I'm okay. Don't forget I had a nap too," she said, lowering herself down onto the ground in front of the log. "I'll keep you company for a while if you don't mind."

"I can't think of anything I'd like better," he said, smiling at her, trying to ignore the way his body was tingling when he joined her in front of the fire. "We can watch the stars together again. That was nice last night."

Hailey nodded, then opened her mouth but hesitated, "Noah, I've only been working for you for a few days, so I still don't know you and Connor very well, but he was talking about his mom today while you were asleep. I'm sure it's nothing new, but I just thought you should know. I did my best to talk him through it, but you might want to follow up with him. You know him better than I do."

"We were talking about her before I fell asleep," he said, then sighed. "He was only three when she left. I think he blames himself for her leaving, but it

wasn't his fault, not completely. She couldn't take being a wife and mother; she was too selfish and self-centered to put that much energy into either role, but I didn't see that until it was too late. If I'd known, I would have never married her, but at the time, it seemed like the right thing to do."

"You don't have to explain it to me. It's really none of my business," she said. "We all make mistakes. I just don't want Connor to suffer because his mother deserted him; I know what it's like to grow up without a mother, but at least mine didn't want to leave me."

"But she's still gone, so I think you understand better than I do what he's going through," Noah said. "Thank you for caring so much about him, I think sometimes he feels like he's all alone."

"I know that feeling all too well," she said with a sigh. "And once I tell my father where I'm working, I'm sure I will really be alone."

"You've got us," Noah said, putting his arm around her. "You're not as alone as you think you are."

Hailey snuggled into his arms for a second, sending a thrill rushing through him, but then she pulled back and looked up at him. "Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked, her brow creased with confusion. "I know that you're a nice guy, that's easy to see now that I've spent some time with you, but you should hate me. My father has been making trouble for your family for a long time."

"First of all, you shouldn't be blamed for your father's actions," he said, then paused to let that sink in. "Secondly, this trouble between our families started a long time ago with our great-grandfathers over the piece of property down in the valley. Your great-grandfather lost it in a poker game and claimed that mine cheated until the day he died. When your grandfather came back from the war, he started up the fight again. I guess he figured he had so much money he could bully his way through the law, but it didn't quite work out that way. The courts sided with my family, and the land stayed with us."

"That's what this fight is all about?" she asked, shaking her head. "Listening to my father, it sounds like your family are the bad guys. He claims you robbed us of that land through bribery and forgery. It's part of our family history. I guess I always thought there was more to it; I mean the way he talks about all of you.....I don't know..... it's almost like he's scared of you."

"I guess that makes sense, we're the only ones who've ever stood up to your family and won," he said. "All that money gives your father a lot of

influence, and he doesn't always use it for good. I'm sure it really bothers him that he hasn't been able to beat us, in court or out."

Hailey fell silent for a long time, "This is a lot more complicated than I thought," she finally said, then shivered. "He's going to be furious when he finds out I'm working for you."

"It's not too late to change your mind," he said, feeling a cold spot forming in his middle when he thought about her leaving. "Your father is going to come after you. You have to know that you're too valuable to him."

Hailey took a deep breath, "Thanks for reminding me what a terrible human being my father is," she said. "I haven't changed my mind, but if you don't want me to stay, I'll understand. You have Connor to think about; this could affect him, and I would hate it if he got hurt or something."

"You let me worry about Connor," he said. "Your father is a mean bastard, but he wouldn't dare touch my son."

Hailey

Hailey wasn't sure that Noah was right, but was reassured that he wasn't the monster her father made him out to be, "I hope that you're right," she finally said. "My father is used to getting his way, and he's determined to break into politics using me as the prize. This is going to completely ruin his plans."

"He'll just have to make new ones," he said, looking down at her. "You're not going to be anyone's prize unless you want to be."

There was an undercurrent to his words and a look in his eyes that made her heart speed up and a thrill rush through her. Realizing that she was holding her breath, she let it out with a long sigh as a comforting warmth began to spread through her body, a sensation she'd only felt one other time in her life. Shocked and a bit frightened by the feeling, she looked away, flustered to think that Noah might feel the same way, unprepared for her girlish crush to be answered by the desire she saw in his eyes.

"Do you remember the first time we met?" she asked, her voice shaking a little. "You saved my life that day. If you hadn't jumped in the river, the current would have taken me; I remember thinking I was going to drown right when you showed up. It's kind of embarrassing, but I had the biggest crush on you after that. You were so brave, so strong, to a fourteen-year-old, it was like something out of a romance novel."

Noah didn't say anything for a long time, and she felt her cheeks turning pink with embarrassment and wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "I was never the same after that," he finally said, then paused. "I'm pretty sure that day was part of the reason my marriage never worked. I just didn't know it until a few weeks ago."

She looked over at him, "You can't mean that," she stammered. "I never saw you again after that. You didn't even stick around to see if I was okay."

"I couldn't stay, you weren't the only one who felt something that day. We connected, Hailey, I can't explain how, but I felt it, and I think you did too," he said. "But I knew nothing could ever come of it, I was twenty years old, you were just fourteen, and don't forget you're the daughter of my father's biggest enemy."

"I thought.....I mean.....you just disappeared," she said, then shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe that's what made it so romantic, the hero steps in and saves the day, then rides off into the sunset."

"Well, I'm not riding off this time," he said, his eyes locking on hers. "It wasn't the right time for us back then, but you're not fourteen anymore, and I'm not afraid to fight for what I want now. It's time to put this feud between our families to rest, and maybe we're the ones to do it."

Slightly breathless, her body doing all kinds of strange things, it took her a second to put a sentence together, "What about Connor?" she asked. "I'm supposed to be taking care of him. I work for you, Noah, it wouldn't be right."

"But only until Maxine comes back. That's only a couple of months, so we'll just spend that time getting to know one another," he said. "Connor will always come first, but I'm not letting you get away again, Hailey."

"I think I'm dreaming again," she said, then slammed her hand over her mouth, a blush creeping up her cheeks. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Noah laughed, "That's okay," he said, smiling down at her. "I have dreams about you too."

A powerful wave of desire rushed through her, and she shivered as goosebumps broke out on her skin, "You shouldn't say things like that, it does something funny to me," she said, slightly breathless. "I'm not very good at this flirting thing, I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself."

"Then we'll keep it simple," Noah said, pulling her close. "I'll just kiss you."

"Oh....." she started, but he cut her words off with his lips, and she

melted into the kiss, unable to do anything else but give into the wonderful feelings coursing through her.

When Noah pulled away from her, he cupped her face with his hands, “I’ve been thinking about doing that since I saw you down by the stream with Connor,” he said. “It won’t be the last time I kiss you, either.”

Just to prove his point, he dipped his head and captured her lips again, growling deep in his chest when she kissed him back, then finally let her go. “It’s going to be a long summer if you keep kissing me that way,” he said, grinning down at her. “But that was definitely worth the wait; now I think I understand why men go for younger women.”

Hailey grinned up at him, “I just hope you can keep up, old man,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to give you a heart attack.”

“Oh, now that sounded like a challenge,” he said. “Shall we see who gives up first?”

She felt her cheeks turning scarlet at what he was suggesting, but the blush was accompanied by a rush of anticipation that made her entire body tingle. “That sounds a bit dangerous,” she stammered. “I mean.....we can’t.....we shouldn’t.....”

“We can and we will,” he said, grinning at her again. “But there’s no rush, I’ve been waiting for you for a long time, Hailey. I don’t mind waiting a bit longer if that’s what it takes.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” she asked, her entire body filling with warmth when she looked into his eyes. “This may be harder than I thought.”

Noah laughed, “That’s what happens when you get involved with someone as irresistible as me,” he said, pulling her up against his chest. “We’ve got a lot of stuff to figure out, Hailey, but it will all work out. I can feel it deep down, we just have to take one thing at a time.”

“Starting with my father,” she said. “I shouldn’t have run off the way I did. I’m going to have to tell him about working for you, hiding it from him only gives him more power.”

“I’ll be right by your side if that’s where you want me,” he said. “In fact, I’d feel better if you didn’t approach him alone, I don’t trust him.”

“I don’t know if you coming with me would be a good idea,” she said. “But I think you’re right, I shouldn’t be alone with him. A meeting in public would be best, at the golf course maybe; he’d probably agree to have lunch with me there.”

“It’s worth a try,” Noah said. “Just promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Don’t worry, he won’t cause a scene in public,” she said. “And since I know you’ll be waiting right outside, I’ll be fine.”

“How do you know that?” he asked. “I might let you go alone.”

“Liar,” she said, grinning up at him. “But it’s okay, I understand. It’s in your nature to protect the things you care about, and honestly, I’ll feel better if I know that you’re there. I’m a little afraid of my father, he’s going to go off the deep end if he hasn’t already.”

“I won’t let him hurt you,” Noah said, his eyes hard. “He’ll be sorry if he even tries.”

“You’re a good man, Noah Russel,” she said, stretching up to give him a kiss. “I’m sure glad you saved me all those years ago.”

“Me too, but that wasn’t much of a thank-you kiss,” he said, grinning at her. “Let’s try that again, but with more feeling.”

She laughed, but it was quickly smothered by Noah’s kiss, and it was a long time before they finally got up from in front of the cold fire and crawled into their sleeping bags.

“Good night, Hailey,” Noah whispered across Connor’s sleeping form. “Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Noah,” she said. “Sleep well.”

CHAPTER 14



NOAH

Early the next morning, they packed up and hauled all the gear back to the truck, then headed home. “The first thing I’m going to do is take a shower, I still smell like that fish,” Hailey said. “Then I’m all yours, Connor. What should we do for the rest of the day?”

“Maybe Connor could give you a tour of the ranch; it might be good if you knew your way around,” Noah suggested. “And we’re probably going to need some groceries if you don’t mind running into town.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said. “Is there a list?”

Noah and Connor exchanged a look, “A list?” he asked. “I never thought about making a list, I usually just buy what looks good.”

“Maxine always makes a list,” Connor said. “I can help you. She used to let me help her all the time.”

“Okay, good, then we have a plan,” Hailey said. “What time do you want to eat dinner?”

He opened his mouth to answer her but noticed a police car sitting at the top of the driveway, “I wonder what this is all about,” he said instead. “Looks like one of Sheriff Carlson’s cars. They don’t usually come out on these back roads.”

When he was even with the car, he stopped and rolled down the passenger window, “Good morning, officer,” he called. “Is there something wrong?”

The man looked a little stunned to see him, “Oh, no, sir, I was supposed to sit here and wait for you,” the man stammered, then winced. “I mean,

there's nothing wrong, move along."

"Yes, sir," he said, then rolled up the window. "I don't like this, something feels off. Connor, I want you to go inside the house as soon as we get back, and don't come out until I come get you."

"Dad, what's wrong?" Connor asked. "I want to help."

"I know, son, and I appreciate it, but I think this is something the grown-ups need to handle," he said. "If you really want to help, stay inside until I know that it's safe for you to come out. Can you do that for me?"

Connor looked like he wanted to argue, then took a couple of deep breaths like he'd taught him, "Okay, Dad, I'll stay inside," he said. "But promise that you'll tell me what happens."

"We don't know that anything is going to happen, so let's not get ahead of ourselves," he said, but in the distance, the wail of police sirens could be heard, and his stomach sank. "You just go on inside as soon as we get there in case."

Connor was running up the stairs into the house when the patrol car that had been sitting out on the road came flying into the yard, sirens blaring. The car came to a skidding halt, the driver's door burst open, and the sheriff's deputy jumped out, pulled his weapon, and pointed it at them. Noah could see the man's hands shaking and the sweat dripping down his face, realized he was dealing with a rookie and stood perfectly still.

"Freeze or I'll shoot," the deputy called. "I'm not kidding, don't move."

"I have no intention of moving, but at some point, you're going to have to tell me why you're pointing a gun at me," he said, keeping his voice level. "I think I deserve to know in case you accidentally shoot me."

"Shut up," the deputy yelled. "You'll find out soon enough, you piece of trash, your kind should all be run out of town, you're nothing but monsters."

He looked over at Hailey, who was still in the truck, hoping she hadn't heard, "That's not a very nice thing to say," he finally said, over the sound of the sirens. "You still haven't told me what this is all about."

Before the deputy could answer, a long line of cars came flying up the driveway, the sheriff's big SUV in the lead and a sleek limousine bringing up the rear. The cars fanned out across his front yard, kicking up a cloud of dust that took several minutes to settle, and then the sheriff got out of his car. He took one look at the deputy and started shaking his head, but before he could say a word, Henry Gordon came bursting out of the limo and stomping over to them.

“Arrest him already,” he shouted. “What are you waiting for? He’s a kidnapper. Look, Hailey is right there in the truck, that should be all the evidence you need.”

The sheriff took a deep breath, “Back off, Henry,” he said, turning to face him. “I’m going to handle this, and you’re going to take a couple steps away from me if you want to stay.”

Hailey’s father looked like he wanted to argue but eventually backed away from the sheriff, mumbling threats under his breath. “Officer Dempsy, put that gun away before I come over there and take it away from you,” the sheriff ordered, his voice tight with anger. “You’re going to shoot someone.”

“But sir, he’s going to escape,” Officer Dempsy challenged. “He’ll, you know, do his thing and get away.”

After letting out a frustrated groan, the sheriff stomped over to Officer Dempsy and took the gun out of his hand, “I want you to get back in your car and go back to the station,” he said, engaging the safety on the gun. “You and I are going to have a little talk when I get back.”

As soon as the gun was safely tucked away, Noah relaxed. He had a pretty good idea what was going on and was looking forward to making a fool out of Henry Gordon. “What can I do for you, Sheriff Carlson?” he asked. “Is there a problem?”

Hailey

“Well, here’s the thing, Mr. Gordon is convinced that you kidnapped his daughter,” the sheriff said. “It seems that no one has heard from her since early Saturday morning, and her car is parked right there, so of course I had to investigate.”

Hailey groaned. Of all the things she thought her father would do, she hadn’t seen this coming, “I haven’t been kidnapped,” she said, getting out of the truck. “I’ve been camping with Noah and Connor.”

“You what?” her father roared from behind the sheriff. “Do you know how many lies I had to tell this weekend to cover for you?”

She walked over and stood next to Noah, “The truth is, I don’t care,” she said. “I don’t want anything to do with your friends or your political career. I just want to live my life the way I want to live it.”

“That is not a choice you get to make,” her father growled. “Now, get in the car. We’re going home right now.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she said. “I’m staying right here. Noah hired me to be Connor’s nanny until Maxine gets back, and then I’ll be substitute teaching. You can tell your friends they’ll have to find a plaything elsewhere.”

“You little bitch, you can’t talk to me that way,” her father said, stomping over to her. “I own you; do you hear me? You’d be nothing without me, just like your mother. I have plans for you, and nothing is going to get in the way of those plans.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she said, so angry she was no longer scared. “You don’t own me, you never have, and you never will. Say what you want about my mother, at least she had a soul, at least she wasn’t black inside like you are. Now go away and leave me alone.”

The slap, when it came, sent her stumbling back a few steps, and before she could even regain her balance, Noah was there, a growl coming from deep in his chest as he lifted her father into the air by the lapels of his jacket. Her father began to struggle, his face filled with fear, but the sheriff was already on the move toward the two men, his hand resting casually on his gun. The spots in her vision finally cleared and she stumbled forward a couple of steps, put her hand on Noah’s arm, surprised when she felt a wave of emotion coming off him.

“Noah, it’s okay, I’m not really hurt,” she said. “You should let him go now.”

“Let it go, Noah,” the sheriff echoed. “You’ve made your point.”

It took a couple of seconds before he lowered her father back to the ground, then slowly let go of his jacket and stepped back from him. “Get off my land, and don’t ever come back,” Noah snarled. “Next time I won’t be so forgiving.”

Her father was wide eyed for a second, but it didn’t take long for his bravado to return, “I want this man arrested. He assaulted me, you all saw it,” he barked. “I want him thrown in jail and charged with his crimes.”

Sheriff Carlson studied her father for a second, then shook his head, “Seems to me the only one who should be arrested and charged for his crimes,” he finally said. “I believe you assaulted the young lady, in fact, looking at it from over here, it also appears that Mr. Russel was only protecting Ms. Gordon from a continued assault from you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” her father said, but his voice had lost some of its authority. “I demand that you arrest this man at once for kidnapping and

assault. I would hate to see you lose your job over this.”

“Henry, you’re just too predictable. I wondered how long it would be before you started making threats,” Sheriff Carlson said. “But you seem to forget that the people elected me, and the people will decide if I get to keep my job. Arresting you would only help my numbers. In case you don’t know it, people around here don’t like you much.”

“The law is the law, and not for us to decide,” her father announced. “Arrest him, or I’ll go over your head to the state police. They like me well enough, thanks to all my donations.”

“You’re just going to push this until I don’t have any choice, aren’t you,” Sheriff Carlson asked her father, then turned to her. “It’s up to you, Hailey, you’re the injured party here.”

She studied her father for a second, “I want him arrested,” she said, meeting his eyes. “And I’m going to ask the judge for a restraining order.”

“Well, that makes my job a bit easier, I thought I was going to have to do this on my own,” the sheriff said, nodding at her. “Deputy Zimmerman, take Mr. Gordon into custody. I’m sure a man of his good breeding won’t cause a fuss. I’m going to get Ms. Gordon’s statement, and then I’ll be along to get him booked and charged.”

“I refuse to be handcuffed,” her father barked. “I’ll take my own car to the station.”

“I’m afraid not,” the sheriff said, then nodded to his men. “Take him in, boys.”

There was only a short struggle before her father was handcuffed and shoved into the back of a cruiser, but by the time it was over, her legs were shaking, and she felt a little lightheaded. Noah wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him, feeling her strength slowly returning just from the contact between them. From the backseat of the patrol car, her father was still screaming at her, but with Noah supporting her, it didn’t sting as much as it would have.

“You’re dead to me; don’t come looking for help when you figure out the truth,” he screamed. “You’re cut off, you’re not getting another cent from me, you little bitch. I’ve already wasted enough money on you. Don’t think for a second that you’re going to teach at any school in this town or this state, for that matter. I’m going to destroy you, you ungrateful little bitch, and I’m going to laugh at you when you come crawling back.”

CHAPTER 15



NOAH

Hailey was trembling in his arms, her eyes huge with shock, “Okay, I think we’ve heard enough,” he said, turning her around and guiding her toward the house. “We’re going inside, so you don’t have to listen to any more of that.”

“I’m okay,” she said, but he could tell from her voice that she wasn’t. “We should check on Connor.”

“I’ll do that as soon as I get you inside,” he said, guiding her through the front door. “I think you need something hot to drink with a good dose of sugar, you’re as white as a sheet.”

She let him lead her through the house with no complaint, but when they walked into the kitchen and saw Connor staring out the window, she pulled back a little. “I don’t know what to tell him,” she said. “He’s just a little boy, I don’t want to scare him.”

“The truth is always best,” he said. “But keep it simple.”

“Hailey, are you okay?” Connor asked, jumping down from the chair he’d been kneeling on and running over to them. “Did that man hit you? Who is he?”

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” she said. “Maybe we could sit down and talk about it.”

“Hailey isn’t feeling very well right now,” he explained to his son. “Sometimes we don’t want to talk about bad things right when they happen. Can you understand that?”

Connor looked up at Hailey, then nodded solemnly, “She needs time to

feel better before she talks about it,” he said. “Shouldn’t we get her some hot tea or something? That’s what they do on television and the movies.”

He could see the relief on Hailey’s face and a little smile, “I think that’s an excellent idea,” he said. “We’ll need to put lots of sugar in it.”

“I’ll get a cup out,” Connor said, taking one more look up at Hailey. “I’m sorry you got hurt, but we’re going to make you feel better.”

Hailey stifled a little sob, “Thank you, Connor,” she said, managing to smile through her tears. “I already feel better.”

“Good,” Connor said, a serious look on his face, “but it’s okay to cry if you feel like it.”

After settling Hailey at the table, he helped Connor make her tea, then a cup of hot chocolate for them both, before putting some ice in a bag and wrapping it in a towel. “I thought this might help,” he said, handing her the ice pack. “I think you’re going to have a bruise.”

She put the ice up against her cheek, wincing before letting out a sigh of relief, “Thank you, it might help,” she said, then looked over at Noah. “Maybe you could give Connor the condensed version of what happened outside. I don’t have the energy.”

Noah was silent for a second, “Well, son, the truth is that Hailey’s dad isn’t a very nice man, and she’s been trying to get away from him,” he said. “She didn’t tell anyone that she was going camping with us this weekend, so he thought we kidnapped her and tried to have me arrested. He slapped her when she refused to go home with him, and that’s when the sheriff stepped in. He’ll handle everything from here, but he will need to talk to Hailey in a few minutes.”

“And you want me to go to my room,” Connor said, his face full of sympathy. “I don’t mind, Dad, but can I stay here with Hailey until then, just to make sure she’s, okay?”

“I think that would be fine,” he said, unable to hide the pride in his voice. “I’m sure she would appreciate that.”

“You bet I would,” Hailey said, smiling at Connor. “It’s nice to have two big, strong men protecting me.”

Connor’s chest puffed up a little bit, “He won’t ever hurt you again,” he said. “Not if I’m around.”

They sipped their drinks in silence for a few minutes, then Hailey took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “I am starting to feel better; that tea really helped,” she said. “But I think if I had a cookie or two, that would help even

more.”

Connor was out of his chair and across the kitchen before he could agree, “I’ve got them,” he said. “I know where Dad hides them.”

He froze then looked over at Noah, who just laughed, “I knew that you knew,” he said. “Your old man is smarter than you think.”

They were on their second cookie when Sheriff Carlson knocked on the back door, “Hey, sorry to interrupt you all, but I need to get a statement from Hailey,” he said when Noah let him in. “It won’t take long; it’s all on bodycam, so we’ve got plenty of footage of what went on.”

“Come on in,” Noah said, holding open the door. “Can we get you a cup of coffee or something?”

“Oh, no thanks, I won’t be here that long,” the sheriff said, then saw Connor. “Hey there, Connor, I hope that wasn’t too scary for you.”

“No, sir,” Connor said. “I just want to make sure that Hailey is okay.”

“Well, we’re going to see to that,” the sheriff said, ruffling his hair. “But it’s nice to see that you’re worried about her.”

“Dad says that I have to go to my room now,” Connor said, then looked over at Noah. “Can I take a cookie with me?”

Hailey

Hailey was still at the table long after the sheriff had left, the empty tea cup in front of her, her emotions swinging wildly, but one thing she was sure of: she wasn’t going to let her father win. She could still feel the moment his hand had connected with her cheek, the shock mixed with fear, and she promised herself that she’d never be that vulnerable again. Noah had stepped in before things had gone any farther, and for that, she would always be grateful and a little charmed, what woman wouldn’t be, but if she was going to be an independent woman, she needed to know how to protect herself.

When Noah sat down next to her a few minutes later, she looked over at him, “Will you teach me some self-defense?” she asked, then laughed at the look on his face. “I need to be able to protect myself. You came to my rescue today, which I really appreciate, but what if you hadn’t been there?”

Noah thought about that for a second, “You have a good point,” he said. “I guess that’s something you’ve never needed to worry about.”

“So, you’ll do it?” she asked. “When can we start?”

“I didn’t say that,” Noah said, shaking his head. “I might not be the right

person to teach you, but I think I know exactly who to ask.”

“But I want you to do it,” she said. “I know you, and I trust you.”

“Well, princess, I’m afraid that might be a little dangerous, as you put it the other night,” he said, grinning at her. “But if you want me to put my hands all over you, I’m game.”

She suddenly understood what he meant and felt her cheeks turning pink, “Oh..... maybe you’re right,” she said, slightly breathless at the thought. “That might be dangerous.”

“Damn, you make this even harder when you blush like that,” he said. “But I’m glad you want to fight; your father isn’t going to back down, he’s going to keep coming at you, especially now that you had him arrested.”

“Let him come,” she said, her voice hard. “I’m going to destroy him, and expose him for the criminal and fraud that he is. When I’m finished with him, no one will want anything to do with him, especially those stuffed shirts he’s always trying to impress.”

Noah was silent for a few seconds, then let out a low whistle, “Wow, remind me never to make you angry,” he said. “What can I do to help?”

“Besides finding someone to teach me to protect myself, nothing right now,” she said. “I haven’t exactly figured out what I’m going to do yet, but I bet there’s someone out there who would be very interested in the jewelry hidden in my father’s desk. I just have to figure out who it is.”

“Sounds like you’re going to need a computer,” Noah said. “There’s one in the study. It’s yours for as long as you need it. I can use my laptop.”

“Thanks, Noah, that will be a big help,” she said, smiling at him. “This might be wrong, but I think I’m going to enjoy this. It’s going to feel good to put something right, and if it ruins my father in the process, that will be even better.”

For the rest of the day, she barricaded herself in the study at the back of the house, her fingers clicking away on the keys as she followed one trail after another until she finally clicked send on the last email she could write. She sat back in the chair and let out a long sigh, not sure what would come of all her inquiries, but with a much clearer understanding of how widespread theft had been at the end of the war.

Her grandfather had been one of many who had left Europe enriched by the possessions of the victims of the death camps, and it made her slightly sick to think about it. When Noah finally stuck his head in as the sun was sinking in the sky, she was more than ready to get away from the computer

and the horror of what humans could and would do to one another, and welcomed him with a smile.

“You look like you could use a break,” Noah said. “Connor and I were thinking it might be nice to go into town for dinner. I think we all need a break from my cooking.....and well.....the sooner you show up in public, the sooner the rumors will die down.”

She let out a long sigh, “After what I’ve been reading all afternoon, facing the town gossips doesn’t seem like that big of a deal,” she said. “I shouldn’t be, but I’m still shocked and horrified by the things people will do to one another.”

Noah crossed the room, pulled her out of the chair and into his arms, “Not all people are bad, Hailey, you know that,” he said. “You’ve just put up with a lot of the bad ones today.”

She let his warmth soak into her, and she felt it chasing away some of the darkness, “Maybe I do need a break; besides, there’s really nothing more I can do until I hear back from someone,” she said. “Let me take a shower and wash some of this.....well, ugliness off of me, then we can head into town.”

“Sounds good,” Noah said, but didn’t let her go. “But let’s just stand here like this for a few more minutes.”

She laughed, “I won’t argue with that,” she said, putting her head on his chest. “I like listening to your heart beating, it sounds like it’s talking to me.”

“Do you know what it's saying?” he asked, an intensity in his eyes she’d never seen before. “It’s telling you that it already belongs to you.”

She looked up at him as the familiar warmth spread through her, followed by thrills that left her speechless, but she knew how to tell him what she was feeling. Stretching up on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss, putting everything that she was feeling into that one moment. When they finally split apart, chests heaving, Noah was grinning like an idiot, and she couldn’t catch her breath.

“My heart is saying a lot of things right now,” he finally said. “And other parts of my body seem to be chiming in. We’d better go to dinner before I listen to them.”

CHAPTER 16



NOAH

Ruth was the first one to greet them when they walked into the diner an hour later, “Well, isn’t this a nice surprise,” she said, then saw the bruise on Hailey’s cheek. “Oh dear, the rumors are true.”

“I’m afraid so,” Hailey said. “But we’re trying to forget about it for a few hours.”

“Of course, let’s get you a table,” Ruth said. “But for what it’s worth, the town is behind you. Most of us are in agreement that he’s gone too far, so if you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks, that’s sweet,” Hailey said. “Right now, I think all I need is a big greasy cheeseburger and some fries.”

“Don’t forget the strawberry shake,” Connor piped up. “You said I could have one too, but I want chocolate.”

“Me too, son,” he said, ruffling his hair. “But maybe we should get a table before we start ordering food.”

Ruth gave them a booth by the window so they could watch Main Street as they ate, but they didn’t have much time for people-watching; between all the well-wishers and ordering their food, there wasn’t a second of silence at the table. When all the commotion finally died down, Hailey sat back and let out a long sigh, then shook her head, feeling like she belonged for the first time since she’d come home.

“Well, that was both overwhelming and heartwarming,” she said when the last new face walked away. “I’ll never remember everyone’s name.”

“They won’t expect you to,” Noah said, smiling at her. “I told you that

you weren't alone. Everyone has been sick of your father for a long time, and I think they all just needed a push in the right direction to become a united front."

"And I was that push?" she asked, shaking her head. "Noah, when I came home, all I wanted to do was get a job teaching and try to make a difference."

"Well, you're certainly making a difference," he said. "Just not the way that you thought you would."

Their food arrived only a second later, three big cheeseburgers with golden brown fries and shakes in their frosty glasses. For a long time, no one said anything as they devoured the food in front of them, but then Hailey sat up straighter in her seat, a look of excitement on her face.

"I just had a thought," she said, pushing her plate away. "Ruth was the one who told me about the man who came to investigate my grandfather; maybe she knows more than she told me that day."

"It's worth a try. Let's go see what she has to say," Noah said, popping the last French fry on his plate into his mouth. "Are you coming with us, Connor?"

Connor shrugged his shoulders, "I'd rather go play video games with my friends from day camp," he said, pointing across the dining room. "I'll be good, I promise."

"Well.....I don't know," he said, digging around in his pocket. "Let's see if I have any money. You can't play video games without quarters."

When he finally slapped a five-dollar bill on the table, Connor began to jump up and down in his seat, "Thanks, Dad," he said. "You're the greatest."

Noah let him out of the booth, then slid back in, "Okay, now that he's occupied for a little while, let's go find Ruth," he said. "I've been hearing those rumors about your grandfather all my life, but I wonder who started them."

"Was there something wrong with your dinner?" Ruth asked when they approached her. "I've been training a new cook, and it all looked fine to me."

"Dinner was fantastic," Hailey said. "There was something else we wanted to talk to you about. Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

Ruth looked surprised but led them through the diner to her office in the back of the diner, pointed to the chairs in front of her desk, and then shut the door. "Okay, what's up?" Ruth asked when she was seated behind her desk. "It must be important."

Hailey glanced over at him, then looked back at Ruth, "We were

wondering if you know any more about the man who came around here asking about my grandfather,” she said. “I know you were just a kid back then, but I thought there might be more than what you told me the other day.”

Ruth studied the two of them for a second, “I’m not the one you should be talking to,” she finally said. “My grandmother worked for your grandfather. She started there as a cleaning girl as soon as the house was finished and worked there until she married my grandfather. She’s the one you want to talk to, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to tell you anything more than I already did.”

“We’d still like to try,” Hailey said. “Do you think she’d agree to talk to us?”

“Oh, honey, she’ll talk your ear off if you let her,” Ruth said. “Why don’t you stop by on your way home? I’ll call and let her know that you’re on the way.”

When they got back to the table, Connor came running over practically bursting with excitement, “Tommy is having another sleepover this weekend,” he said. “We’re going to put a tent up in the backyard and stay up all night. Can I go?”

“That’s fine, as long as you behave yourself this week,” he said. “And I want to talk to Tommy’s parents before the sleepover. You know the rules.”

Connor groaned, “I know the rules, Dad,” he said. “Tommy’s mom said she’d call you tomorrow.”

“Okay, run over and tell them thank you for the invitation,” he said. “Then hurry back; we have a quick stop to make before we go home.”

Hailey

Hailey led the way up the sidewalk to the little house, a box with a pie inside in her hands, but moved to the side and let Noah knock on the door, relieved when it was thrown open by a woman who looked like an older version of Ruth. “Well, there you are,” Mrs. McIntyre said, smiling at them. “Oh, you’ve brought a pie. I bet that was my granddaughter’s doing, bless her heart. Please come in. I’ve already got a fresh pot of coffee on; now we can have pie to go with it.”

“It’s apple, your favorite,” she said, holding out the box. “I’m Hailey, by the way.”

Mrs. McIntyre waved her introduction away, “Ruth explained who you

are. I'm sure sorry about your father, he always was a difficult person," she said, shaking her head. "But I suppose you already knew that, so I don't know why I'm telling you that, probably just to hear myself talk."

They all laughed, "That's okay, we really appreciate you taking the time to see us," she said, following the older woman through the house into the kitchen. "We'll try not to take up too much of your time."

"Time is one thing I have an abundance of now that I've retired," Mrs. McIntyre said. "In fact, this is the most excitement I've had in months. I just wish I was a few years younger; I'd like to help you stick it to your father."

She glanced over at Noah, trying not to laugh, "Well, we appreciate any help you can give us," Noah said, his voice full of amusement. "Ruth told us that you worked for Hailey's grandfather right after the new house was built."

"Oh, yes, it was such a fancy house, I thought I was so lucky to get the job," Mrs. McIntyre said, easing herself down into a chair at the table. "It was my first job, you know, I was only seventeen and very innocent, but that didn't last long working for your grandfather. I learned pretty quickly that not all men followed the same code of ethics. Until that night, it had only been little things, cheating at business deals, refusing to pay contractors that worked on the house."

Mrs. McIntyre fell silent, her eyes focused off in the distance, then shook her head, "I'm sorry, I lost track there for a second. It happens when you get to be my age," she said. "Now, before we talk about that night, I think we need some of that pie. Let me get some plates."

"Connor and I will get them," Noah said, getting to his feet. "I think I still remember where everything is."

"You were always a sweet boy," Mrs. McIntyre said, smiling at him. "Bring the coffee over while you're at it."

"Yes, ma'am," Noah said, his cheeks turning pink. "If I remember correctly, we'll need the cream and sugar too."

That little flush of pleasure told her so much about the man standing across the room, only adding to the picture she was developing about the kind of man he was, and she felt something swelling to life in her chest. It rushed through her with a wave of warmth, and she sucked in a deep breath when she realized what she was feeling was love. Head spinning, a little dizzy, she could only stare at Noah as he made himself at home in the little kitchen, chatting with Connor as he worked, a smile on his face.

"I remember that feeling," Mrs. McIntyre said, reaching over and patting

her arm. "He's a good man, Hailey, his love will be true."

"Oh.....I.....we aren't..... there isn't anything going on between us," she stammered. "I work for him."

"It's okay, I understand, love can be a tricky business," Mrs. McIntyre said, an understanding smile on her face. "You don't have to explain to me, but I've seen the way Noah looks at you. He's not the kind of man who lets little details like that get in his way. He's a lot like my Harold; we were married for fifty years, and I've never met a more stubborn man, but I loved him like the dickens, and I wouldn't give up a minute of the time I had with him."

"Here we go," Noah said, setting the pie and a stack of plates down on the table. "I'll be right back with the coffee."

When they were all settled back around the table, Connor paying more attention to the pie in front of him than their conversation, she turned to Mrs. McIntyre. "You were talking about the night everything changed before," she said. "What happened that night?"

Mrs. McIntyre let out a long sigh, "I'd been on the job for about a month, enough time to prove myself to your grandmother, so she gave me permission to serve your grandfather," she said, then took a long sip of her coffee. "It was late one night, and I was just about to go off duty when your grandfather rang to have coffee brought to his study, and that fell within my new duties, so I put together a tray and delivered it like I was supposed to."

The old woman paused, took another sip of her coffee, then shook her head, "I was so nervous the tray was shaking as I pushed open the door and stepped inside, but your grandfather didn't even look up from his desk," she said. "He just waved me over to a table in the corner of the room and went back to what he was doing. It wasn't until I was on my way back out of the room that I noticed the jewelry spread across his desk. There was so much of it: rings, bracelets, cuff links, and several glittering diamonds that caught the light as I walked by."

Hailey looked over at Noah, then back at Mrs. McIntyre, "At first I was jealous of all their wealth, but as I looked closer at everything spread across the desk, I started to realize that something wasn't quite right," she said, with another shake of her head. "It wasn't until I saw the stack of receipts from a jewelry store in New York stacked neatly on the edge of the desk that I began to understand what I was seeing. When the truth hit me, I got out of there fast. I'd heard the rumors, everyone in town had, but I didn't believe it was

true until that night.”

“What did you do?” Hailey asked. “Did you tell anyone about what you saw?”

“Just Harold, I was afraid to tell anyone else. Your grandfather was already very powerful by then,” Mrs. McIntyre said. “I worked there until Harold and I got married two years later, but I never saw anything like that again.”

Hailey looked over at Noah, a smile slowly spreading across her face, “We need to find those records. That would prove beyond a doubt where our money came from,” she said, then turned back to Mrs. McIntyre. “I don’t suppose you have any idea where those records might have been stored back then?”

Mrs. McIntyre shook her head, “I never saw them again after that night,” she said, then her face brightened. “But I noticed an opening in the paneling behind the desk that night. I remember thinking it must have been dusty inside there and I would have to clean it.”

“Another hidden compartment, just like the one in the desk,” she said, giving the old woman a hug. “That’s perfect, and I bet those records are still in there. All we have to do is figure out how to get our hands on them.”

“We aren’t going to get our hands on anything, we’re going to let the proper authorities do that,” Noah said, sending her a disapproving glance, then looked over at Mrs. McIntyre. “Do you remember anything about the man from the army that came to town asking about the Gordons? Hailey hasn’t had much luck finding someone to talk to about this.”

Mrs. McIntyre didn’t answer right away, then her face lit up, “Oh, now I remember,” she said, getting slowly to her feet. “I put it in the desk. Wait right here, I have what you need.”

When she came back a few minutes later, she slapped an old, worn business card down in front of Hailey. “I don’t know if he’s still alive,” she said. “But maybe this will help. I never had the guts to call him myself, but I’d be happy to talk about this now.”

CHAPTER 17



NOAH

Noah didn't like the look on Hailey's face as they walked back to his truck, "What's going on inside that head of yours?" he finally asked when they were all buckled in. "And don't say nothing, I can see the mischief in your eyes."

She studied him for a second, then let out a long sigh, "You're not going to like it," she said. "But it would be easy for me to slip into the house and get those receipts. I could even take the jewelry; then we'd have the hard evidence we need."

"You're right, I don't like it," he said, shaking his head. "That sounds dangerous. This isn't a detective show on television, this is real life, if your dad found you in the house....."

Hailey glanced into the backseat, but Connor was lost in his own world, playing with a toy car and singing a song under his breath. "I wouldn't get caught. I know his schedule, Noah," she said. "I could plan it for when he's out of town. I'm sure I could get one of the servants to let me in. Kevin always liked me, and there's this one woman in the kitchen, she'd do it, I'm sure of it. I'll just tell them that I left some of my mom's things behind, they won't say no to that. The grief card always works."

He shook his head, "This is not a solid plan, Hailey," he said. "And I'm ashamed of you for using your mother's death like that."

"You just don't want me to do it," she shot back. "It would work, Noah, I know it would."

It was impossible to miss the stubborn glint in Hailey's eyes, and he knew

arguing with her wasn't going to work, "Look, how about this: we call that guy on the card that Mrs. McIntyre gave you and see what he says," he suggested. "If that doesn't lead anywhere, then we can discuss your plan."

Hailey looked down at the card still in her hand, "Okay, I guess that's fair," she said. "But my way would be quicker, and I keep thinking that someone is going to tip him off, and he'll move everything or get rid of it or something."

"We haven't told anyone about what you found. The worst that's going to happen is that he'll hear that we're asking questions," he said. "First thing tomorrow, we'll call the number on that card. If this is the right contact, something will happen quickly after that."

"I hope so," she said. "I don't want him to get away, he deserves to be exposed to the world."

He reached over and took her hand, "And we'll see what happens," he said. "But we're going to do it the safe way. I'm getting used to having you around."

Hailey's cheeks turned pink and she let out a sigh, "Okay, fine, we'll do it your way," she said. "I'm kind of getting used to you too."

The next day, just as he'd predicted, they were welcoming a guest for lunch, "Please come in, Sargent Abrams," he said, opening the door to the man. "We appreciate you coming so fast. Hailey has been anxious to meet you. She's in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on lunch."

"It was kind of you to invite me to lunch," Sargent Abrams said. "Please call me Joseph. This can be tricky business, and I've found it's much better to be a little less formal at times."

"Noah, then," he said, holding out his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

He led Joseph through the house back to the kitchen and introduced him to Hailey, who was a bit nervous, but settled down once the food was on the table. "I'm sorry to hear about your father," Hailey said, passing the first of the dishes to their guest. "I lost my mother when I was small. It's a loss you never quite get over."

"Thank you, he will be missed," Joseph said. "I like to think that he's up there somewhere watching me."

"I'm sure he'd be pleased to know that you're carrying on his work," Noah said. "It must be a very difficult job, dealing with the worst of humanity every day."

"But it has its upside," Joseph said. "I get to reunite families with their

treasured heirlooms, and that makes it all worth it. I understand you think you've found just the kind of thing I'm interested in."

Hailey pulled her phone out of her pocket, opened up the picture gallery, and slid it over to Joseph, "I found these hidden in my father's desk," she said, then explained to him about finding the jewelry and their talk with Mrs. McIntyre. "I'm sorry the pictures aren't better; I was hurrying and a little upset."

Joseph took his time examining each photo as they ate their lunch, making occasional comments about a particular jewel or the quality of the gold used in a setting. "Now, understand I can't be one hundred percent sure unless I'm holding these in my hand, but I feel fairly certain none of them are new. Most look to be between fifty and two hundred years old," Joseph said, returning the phone to Hailey. "And the box they were in looks even older, and that is Hebrew on the lid, which is a dead giveaway. Where are these pieces now?"

"Still in my father's desk," Hailey said. "I panicked and put them back. You have to understand I didn't know anything about this until recently, but I'm determined to make this right."

Joseph reached out and patted Hailey's hand, "You're not the first descendent to feel this way," he said. "I'm going to help you and all the people your grandfather stole from. I just want to be sure that you're ready for what will follow. People can be cruel when something like this comes out."

"I don't care," Hailey said. "What my grandfather did was terrible, and I feel guilty every day that I've profited from it. Do what you have to."

"So, what is our next step?" Noah asked. "Will you be able to get a search warrant or something?"

"I'm afraid not, at least not yet," Joseph said. "These things take time. If I had a little more proof, it might be different. But I can start doing some more digging. Time has a way of uncovering secrets, even deeply buried ones."

"What about the receipts?" Hailey asked. "Would those help?"

Joseph was silent for a second, "Yes, I suppose it would be enough to get a judge interested," he said. "But I'm not advising you to go in there and steal them. We might be better off following the lead in New York. There were only a few jewelers buying those stolen pieces back then."

He could tell by the look in Hailey's eyes that she wasn't listening, "She's going to do it anyway," he said, shaking his head, affection for the

strong, stubborn woman he was falling in love with making him feel warm all over. “So, you’d better tell us what you need; I’m only letting her go back in there one more time.”

Hailey looked over at him, a huge smile on her face, “Thank you, Noah,” she said. “You’ll see, I’ll be in and out of there in no time at all.”

Hailey

Hailey stood at the window watching the rain come down, tapping her foot nervously, hoping the storm didn’t derail their plans and wondering what was taking Noah so long. It had been almost an hour since he’d left to drop Connor off at the sleepover, more than enough time to get there and back, unless there was a problem. If the sleepover was canceled, there was no way they could go traipsing around in the middle of the night with Connor at home, but if they didn’t go tonight, it would be weeks before her father left home again. It was now or never, and it looked like everything that could go wrong was going to go wrong.

When Noah’s truck finally appeared in the driveway, she watched anxiously until she knew for certain that he was alone, then let out a long sigh. “How did it go?” she asked, when he came in, rain dripping off his hat. “I was sure it would get canceled.”

“They put the tents up in the basement,” he said, shaking the rain off his coat and hanging it up by the back door. “The boys are just as happy with that arrangement as they were with the backyard, so we’re good. Tommy’s parents are going to drop Connor off after lunch.”

“Now we just have to wait for dark,” she said, then pulled him into the kitchen. “You’re soaked. Let me get you something hot to drink.”

“I have a better idea,” Noah said, pulling her into his arms. “How about if you warm me up?”

“Noah, you’re cold and wet, we’ll both be soaked,” she squealed, fighting to get away at first, but then heat began to creep into her, and she relaxed in his arms just as his mouth came down on hers.

Pleasure swept through her when Noah’s tongue slipped into her mouth, and no longer noticing Noah’s wet clothes, she pressed her body up against his. Her nipples hardened instantly, sending another wave of sensation rushing through her already heated body, and she sighed into the kiss. When his hands began to roam, first up and down her back, then lower over her hips

and back up to cup her breasts in his big hands, she was vaguely aware that he'd never gone that far before, but was powerless to stop him.

When he finally pulled away, her entire body was humming with pleasure and a feeling she couldn't explain. "This is definitely going to be harder than I thought," Noah said, looking into her eyes, making the feeling get even stronger. "After we take care of things with your dad, I think we need to have another talk. Two months is a long time, I'm not sure I can make it another two hours without you."

Her entire body began to throb, thrill after thrill rushed through her, "Noah, that's the most wonderful thing a man has ever said to me, but also the worst," she teased, trying desperately not to give into the need pounding through her. "I think I need to start looking for a new job. Two months sounds like an eternity to me, too."

"I could just stop paying you," he said, grinning at her. "Then you wouldn't be working for me anymore."

"You haven't paid me anything yet," she reminded him. "So, I guess technically we aren't doing anything wrong."

Noah's face lit up, "Hey, you're right," he said, then swept her up in his arms. "What are we waiting for?"

"Don't tempt me, Noah Russel. Have you forgotten we have someplace to be in a few hours?" she reminded him. "It could be weeks before we get another chance to get inside the house when we know my father is out of town."

"What I have in mind won't take that long," he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. "Half that time should be about right."

"That's awfully quick," she teased. "How disappointing."

"Now that sounded like a challenge," he said, setting her down on her feet. "And an hour wouldn't be anywhere near long enough for that, so I guess we will have to wait."

She laughed, then stretched up and gave him a quick kiss, "Excellent idea," she said. "But let's not wait too much longer."

He groaned and tried to pull her back into his arms, but she slipped away, "Come on, let's have something to eat before we leave," she said. "We're going to need our strength. I wasn't planning on hiking through the rain, but it's not supposed to stop until tomorrow morning."

"It's going to be a sloppy mess out there," he said, looking out the window. "We should allow a little extra time to get there."

Even with rain gear, they were both soaked by the time they walked up to the kitchen door at the back of her father's house, "You're going to be miserable waiting out here for me," she said, looking up at Noah. "Are you sure you don't want to come inside? You could wait in the kitchen."

"I think it's better if they think that you're alone," he said. "The less attention we get the better, but I want you to be careful. If someone catches you, get out of there."

Hailey quietly eased the door to her father's study open, then looked up and down the hallway before slipping inside and headed straight for the desk. Unlike the last time, she knew what she was looking for, and quickly had the little bundle in her hands. She snapped the photographs she needed, then put it back. The next part wasn't going to be as easy; she only had a vague idea of where the little compartment was located, but knew there had to be a button or release lever somewhere.

Starting on one end of the wall, she worked her way across, running her fingers over the paneling, disappointed when she found nothing, but took a deep breath and started over. She was halfway down the wall when the study door creaked open, and Kevin stepped into the room. They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds before her brain engaged.

"Oh, Kevin, maybe you could help me," she said, trying to look upset. "I was sure there was a picture of my mother in here somewhere, but I can't find it, and I really wanted to take it with me."

He crossed the room toward her without a word, a look on his face she couldn't quite read, then ran his hand across the top edge of the paneling, a place she'd never thought of checking, and with a pop, unlatched the door to the hidden compartment. He walked over, pulled the door all the way open, then stood back, and indicated that she could proceed, but she was too shocked to move.

"Go ahead, I know this is what you're looking for," Kevin finally said when she just stood there staring at him. "I'm on your side, Hailey. I've been looking for a way to get even with your father for years. You just beat me to it, but I should have known that you would. You're so much smarter than he is. Take what you want, just be sure to latch the door tightly when you're finished. I'll make sure no one disturbs you."

It took her a second to understand that she hadn't been caught, that Kevin was in fact trying to help her, "But why?" she asked, then shook her head. "It doesn't matter, I'm sure you have your reasons. I always wondered why you

put up with the way my father treats you.”

“They’re good reasons, but now isn’t the time for that story. I’ll protect you, but I can’t predict what some of the others will do if they catch you,” Kevin said, smiling at her. “You’d better hurry, and Hailey, I think you should know that your father is planning to put Cinnamon down tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 18



NOAH

Noah stuck close to the house so the rain wasn't falling directly on him, but as the minutes ticked by, some water still managed to find a way into any opening it could, leaving him wet and cold. Hailey was taking much longer than she should have, and he was beginning to get worried. He didn't want to have to go inside after her, but would if it was his only choice. Hunkering down, he counted off the minutes, then unable to wait any longer, slipped out of the shadows and made his way to the kitchen door.

Hailey came bursting out just as he was about to reach for the handle, nearly knocking him over, "What's wrong?" he asked, grabbing onto her to steady them both. "Did someone catch you?"

"Kevin came in while I was searching for the hidden panel," she said, pushing him away and starting across the yard. "He helped me find it. Apparently, he's been working here all this time looking for a way to get revenge on my father."

"So, we're fine," he said, realizing that they were going to the wrong way. "Hailey, where are you going?"

"To get my horse," she said. "My father is going to have her put down tomorrow, I can't leave her here."

"Hailey, we can't just take her, that's theft. He'll just take her back," he said, lengthening his stride to keep up with her. "I don't think we can risk him knowing that we've been here either."

She stopped and turned to face him, "I can't just leave her here, and if that's really what you'd do, then you're not the man I thought you were," she

said. "He's going to put her down, Noah, just to spite me. He's going to kill a perfectly healthy horse; she's only fifteen years old."

Her words were like a slap in the face, "You're right, I'm sorry," he said, urging her on. "I got carried away trying to protect you. Let's go get your horse."

Hailey stopped again, stretched up, and gave him a quick kiss, "Thank you, Noah," she said. "I know you're worried about me, but Cinnamon means a lot to me. She was the last thing my mother gave me before she died, I can't lose her too. Besides, she's legally mine, my mother made sure of that."

When they got to the barn, he held her back, "Let's check things out before we go storming in there," he said. "I want to know what we're up against."

Hailey nodded, then took a deep breath, "Okay, you're right, all I can think about is Cinnamon....." her words trailed off, then she shook her head and squared her shoulders, clearly ready to fight. "There's always someone on duty in the barn overnight; they're not expected to stay awake, so whoever it is will probably be sleeping on the cot in the office. If we're quiet, we might be able to get in and out without anyone even knowing we were there."

He studied the barn for a second, imagining where the office would be, "I'll go first. If we do run into someone, I'll take care of them, you get Cinnamon," he said. "Once you've got her, don't wait for me, get down to the creek and over onto my property. I'll be right behind you."

Hailey gave him a quick hug, "Promise me that you'll be careful, some of the men my father hires aren't the nicest people in the world," she said. "And just so there's no miscommunication, I'm not leaving without you."

He recognized the stubborn gleam in Hailey's eyes and let out a sigh, "Why did I have to fall for such a stubborn woman?" he asked, then gave her a kiss. "Let's just hope a diversion isn't necessary."

His hopes were dashed the instant they stepped into the barn, "Mr. Gordon said I should expect you," a man said, emerging out of the shadows. "Howdy, Ms. Gordon, you probably don't remember me. Why would you, a stuck-up little bitch like you wouldn't remember someone like me."

"We're just here to get Hailey's horse," he said. "We don't want any trouble."

"I'm afraid I can't let that happen. You see, I've got strict orders to have that horse killed tomorrow," the man said, taking a few steps toward them.

“I’m very motivated to see that it happens; you see I’ve got a big bonus coming my way when it’s over and Cinnamon is six feet under the ground.”

“You might as well kiss that bonus goodbye, because we’re not going to let anyone hurt that horse,” he said, taking a few steps of his own to put Hailey behind him. “The way I figure it, you could save yourself a lot of pain and suffering if you just walk away now, h. Heck, I’ll even give you some cash for your troubles.”

The man’s face turned scarlet, and he knew that he had him, and moved a couple more steps to pull him farther away from Hailey, who was slowly creeping over to Cinnamon’s stall. “Those are big words coming from such a small man,” the cowboy said, his voice low and threatening. “Let’s just see if you have anything to back them up.”

He wondered if the idiot realized he’d just told him he was going to throw a punch, but took it anyway, hoping to give him a false sense of security, and saw instantly it had worked. “Wow, that was fun,” he taunted. “I think I’m going to have to do it again.”

He took the second punch, cursing when the cowboy’s fist connected with his lip, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hailey slowly opening the stall door, a halter already in her hand. “Is that all you’ve got?” he said, then turned and spit out a glob of blood. “My son is seven, and he can punch better than that.”

Hailey gasped behind him, but he didn’t look back at her, didn’t dare take his eye off the cowboy who had turned a shade of scarlet he didn’t think was possible. “You bastard,” the man growled at him. “Are you going to keep running your mouth like a sissy or take a punch at me?”

“I’m actually having a great deal of fun running my mouth, as you put it,” he said, grinning. “You, however, don’t seem to be enjoying our little encounter as much as I am.”

The man was about to charge him, he felt it coming, but just then another man stepped out of the back of the barn, “What the hell is going on in here, Charlie?” the man demanded. “Are you fighting again?”

“This asshole is trying to steal one of Mr. Gordon’s horses,” Charlie said. “I was just going show him what we do to horse rustlers around here.”

“Well, now that sounds like fun,” the other man said, then put his fingers in his mouth and let out a short whistle. “And I bet the other boys would love to help.”

Hailey

Hailey grabbed Cinnamon's mane and vaulted onto her back just as four more men came running into the barn and nearly tumbled over the other side when a wave of panic threw her off balance. Righting herself, she swung Cinnamon around in a circle, hoping to distract the men long enough for Noah to get away, but he stood his ground as they slowly began to circle him. He glanced over at her and gestured for her to go, but she hesitated until she realized she was only distracting him from the men.

Wheeling Cinnamon toward the open doors, she dug in her heels and raced out into the rain, instantly soaked the second she left the barn's shelter. But she didn't feel the cold; instead, there was a burning sensation deep in the pit of her stomach, a burning need to make sure that Noah was safe. As if sensing what she was feeling, Cinnamon began to throw her head around and whinny, even turning once and nipping at her.

"I know, girl, we can't leave him there," she said, reigning Cinnamon in and turning her back toward the barn. "Let's go get our man."

Cinnamon was streaking toward the barn before she could even dig in her heels. When they hit the door, she called out Noah's name, then plowed through several of the men. The mare came to a sliding stop next to Noah, then began to paw the ground and snort, kicking out at the men with both her front and back legs when any of them tried to approach her.

She barely managed to hold on as the horse bucked around, but she wrapped the reins around her hand and squeezed her legs around Cinnamon's middle. "Noah, get on," she called. "I can't hold onto her for much longer."

A second later, Noah was behind her. Cinnamon let out one more giant snort just as she spun around, and a second later, they were galloping out of the barn into the driving rain. It only took a little nudge of her knee to turn the horse toward the path that led to the creek, a trail they'd both taken so many times. Cinnamon instinctively knew where to go, even blinded by the rain. They ate up the ground beneath them as they galloped across the huge yard and into the trees, but behind them she could hear the shouts of her father's men, then the pounding of hooves on the ground behind them.

She didn't dare turn around to look. Cinnamon was already overloaded; a shift in weight might throw her off balance on the muddy trail and send them all tumbling, but Noah took a quick glance over his shoulder. "They're right behind us," he called over the noise of the rain. "We're going to have to go

faster, or they'll catch us."

"I know a shortcut, they'll never be able to follow us in the rain," she called back. "You'd better hold on; the turn is coming up."

When she saw the break in the trees, she slowed Cinnamon just enough to keep them from sliding off the trail, then held her breath until the horse got her footing again. Her heart was pounding as they took off again, throwing up clumps of mud behind them, but Noah had his arms wrapped tightly around her, keeping her firmly in control in a way she'd never been before. A feeling she could only describe as power filled her as they shot through the trees, the sound of the men behind them slowly getting fainter.

Sure, that they'd made it, she started to relax, but then the creek that ran between the properties appeared out of the darkness, and her entire body tensed up at the sight of the rushing water. Gone was the gently flowing stream that bubbled over rocks and fed the carpet of moss along its banks. Instead, what they were facing was a roaring river, full of floating debris. She only had few seconds to make a decision, but felt Cinnamon gathering herself to jump and put all her faith in the animal she'd raised from just a filly.

"Hold on, we're going over," she screamed over her shoulder, then lowered herself against Cinnamon's neck.

Only a second later, Cinnamon launched them into the air, and time seemed to slow down as they flew over the turbulent water, then landed with a huge splash on the other side in a foot of water. Her momentum still carrying her, Cinnamon fought her way out of the water and began trotting through the trees, her chest heaving, her steps beginning to falter for the first time.

"That's enough for now," she said, pulling the horse to a halt and sliding down off her back. "You're a real hero, you're going to get a full bucket of oats when we get back to the barn."

Noah was already walking around Cinnamon, checking her for injuries, "She looks fine, no harm done," he finally said. "But we need to get her back to the barn, she's just about worn out."

"That makes two of us," she said, nuzzling Cinnamon one more time. "I think we should walk from here."

It took them ten minutes to make it to the barn, and she wanted to weep with relief when they were met by a sleepy barn hand, who just stared at them for a second before jumping into action. It didn't take her long to see that Cinnamon was in good hands, and after giving her a couple of apples as

a treat, she let Noah drag her out of the barn and back up to the house, only noticing that she was shivering when they stepped back out into the rain.

“We need to get you warmed up right away,” Noah said as soon as they stepped inside. “I want you to go upstairs and take a hot shower. There’s a bathrobe on the back of the door when you’re finished.”

“I should take some of these wet clothes off here,” she said, fumbling with the zipper on her jacket. “I’m shaking too much, and my fingers won’t work. I think you’re going to have to help me.”

“You’re starting to turn blue,” Noah said, sweeping her up in his arms and starting for the stairs. “We shouldn’t have stayed out in the barn so long.”

She sighed when his body heat began to soak into her and snuggled a little deeper into his arms, “You’re warm,” she said. “How can you be so warm?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” he said, then kissed her on the forehead. “Hold on for just a little bit longer. We’ll have you warmed up in no time.”

CHAPTER 19



NOAH

Noah carried Hailey down the hallway, through the master bedroom, and into his bathroom, put her directly into the shower and turned the water on. “Noah, I still have my clothes on,” she said, teeth chattering so badly he could barely understand her. “My boots are all muddy, they’re making a mess everywhere.”

“Your clothes are staying on until you stop turning blue,” he said, adjusting the hot water, then stepped in with her and pulled her into his arms. “Just stand here until you start getting warm, and then we’ll worry about the mess. Getting you warmed up is more important.”

“Thank you,” she said, snuggling into his arms, her body still trembling. “I’m starting to warm up already.”

They stood that way until Hailey stopped shivering, and the color came back to her face, “I think I’m warmed up enough to take my clothes and boots off now, I feel kind a silly standing here fully dressed,” she said, looking up at him. “I know that you’re mad at me, but I knew Cinnamon could make that jump. She knew that she could do it, I could feel it, she didn’t even hesitate.”

“You shouldn’t have come back for me, either. I could have handled those guys,” he said. “It was incredibly stupid and incredibly brave. As for that jump, well.....that was pure instinct, and I can respect that, but you still scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry, Noah,” she said, her bottom lip beginning to tremble. “I just couldn’t leave you behind, you mean too much to me. Besides, you would

have done the same thing.”

“That’s different,” he said, knowing that he should explain, that he should tell her about being a shifter, but he couldn’t quite find the words. “I would have been fine on my own.”

“Well, it didn’t look like it to me,” Hailey said. “Are we going to have our first fight?”

He let out a long sigh, then crushed her to him, “No, we’re not going to fight over this, I just wish you’d be more careful, that’s all,” he said. “You mean a lot to me, Hailey, and it goes against everything inside me to let you risk your safety like that.”

“I’ll do it again if I have to,” she said. “But we got what we needed, Noah. It’s over, all we have to do is turn everything over to Joseph, and he’ll take it from there. We’ll be able to stand back and watch after that, and I can’t wait to see my father brought down once and for all.”

Feeling his body beginning to respond to having Hailey in his arms all wet and warm, he stepped back from her, “I should probably get out,” he said. “You probably want to get out of those wet clothes.”

Hailey studied him for a second, then licked her lips, making a thrill race through him, “Maybe you could help me with my boots before you go,” she said. “I don’t know if I can manage on my own.”

Understanding the meaning of sweet torture for the first time, he slid his hand down her leg and lifted her foot up to his knee, then slowly unlaced her boot and slid it off her foot. He repeated the process on the other foot, then started to get out, but Hailey put out her hand and stopped him, a little smile on her face, then unzipped his jacket and slid it off his shoulders. It fell in a wet heap on the floor of the shower; Hailey shoved it out of the way with her foot before reaching for his shirt and pulling it over his head.

She ran her hands up and down his chest, then looked up at him, “Aren’t you going to help me with my clothes?” she asked. “I think my hands are shaking too much to do it on my own.”

The invitation in her eyes warmed him even more than the hot water had, but he hesitated, “Hailey, are you sure?” he asked. “There won’t be any turning back after this. I know that sounds strange, but I need to make sure you understand, this is for keeps.”

“I think it has been since that day you pulled me out of the river when I was fourteen. We’ve waited long enough, Noah,” she said. “Oh, and by the way, I quit.”

He laughed, then pulled her into his arms, slammed his mouth down on hers, his entire body throbbing with anticipation, but he forced himself to slow down. He wanted this to be a night that they would never forget. Ignoring the little voice in his head reminding him that he hadn't told her about being a shifter, he stripped off Hailey's wet jacket, then her shirt, before letting his hands roam over her exposed skin. She let out little whimpers of pleasure and kissed him back until he was forced to break the kiss to slowly slide her wet jeans down over her hips.

When he stood up again, he let his eyes roam over her body as the water washed over her, running between her full breasts, across her stomach, and down between her legs. After stepping out of his boots, he stripped of his pants, releasing his throbbing manhood, then stepped back over to her, and removed her bra and panties, adding the scraps of lace to the pile on the floor. His hands found her breasts, making Hailey gasp and her nipples harden against his palms, his mouth soon followed, and he teased the taunt peaks until she was trembling in his arms.

Spinning her around, he pulled her up against his chest, then slid one hand down her stomach while the other began to tease her nipples with his thumb and finger. When he dipped his finger between Hailey's soft folds, he found her hot and wet, more than ready for him, and his body began to demand satisfaction, but he held onto his control. Sliding his finger back and forth over her swollen pleasure button, he nibbled on her neck, each moan of pleasure that escaped from her parted lips making his body throb even harder, until, crying out his name, she tumbled over the edge.

Hailey

Hailey was swept away by the sheer power of the pleasure that coursed through her body, unprepared for the depth or the wonder of what was happening to her, and could barely catch her breath. She leaned heavily against Noah as her body shook and trembled, his name on her lips until the last wave crashed over her, and she began to float back down to Earth. The first thing she became aware of was a throbbing need deep inside her that she instinctively knew could only be satisfied by one thing, and she tried to turn in his arms, but he had her pinned to his chest.

“Please, Noah, I need you now,” she pleaded. “I need you inside me.”

With a growl that echoed through the room, Noah grabbed her by the

hips, nudged her legs apart with his knees, then bent her over and drove himself deep inside her. The empty place deep inside her was instantly filled, sending a new wave of pleasure rushing through her, and she cried out his name. Noah drove himself into her willing body over and over again, forcing her to hold onto the wall as he joined their bodies in the way nature intended.

She climbed higher and higher, then just as she felt herself sliding over the crest again, Noah pulled out, swept her into his arms, and carried her into the bedroom. He threw her down onto the bed, crawled between her legs, and with his eyes locked on hers, buried himself deeply inside her again. Each powerful thrust of his hips brought a new wave of pleasure, and she began to climb again, her eyes never leaving his, and she felt something more than just physical pleasure, she felt the warmth of the connection between them.

Gasping for breath, her entire body and soul now filled with the man above her, she tumbled over the edge, her muscles clenching tightly around Noah, who with a cry of his own, soared with her. He emptied himself inside her, then body still trembling, collapsed on top of her, his breath coming in short gasps. They lay that way for a long time, then Noah rolled over onto his back, pulled her into his arms, and tucked her into his side with a contented sigh that she felt deep inside.

Overwhelmed by the depth of what she was feeling, she lay there silently trying to gather her thoughts, “Are you okay?” Noah finally asked. “I didn’t hurt you, did I? That wasn’t what I planned..... the shower wasn’t.....”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt better in my life,” she purred, looking up at him. “I don’t know what you had planned but it couldn’t have been any better than that.”

“I should probably go turn off the water,” he said, “but I don’t want to move.”

“I’ll get it,” she said, slipping out of bed. “Don’t move.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he said, his eyes following her across the room.

When she got back in bed with him, he rolled over onto his side, leaned up on one elbow, and looked down at her, “Now, about those plans that I had,” he said, sliding one hand down her stomach. “I worked really hard on them, so I don’t think I’m willing to give them up.”

“Noah, we just.....” but her words died away when his finger found its target.

The moon was already sinking in the sky when they finally fell asleep, tangled together in Noah’s big bed, the passion between them finally spent

after hours of lovemaking. Hailey snuggled deeper into Noah's arms, the love flowing between them sending out sparks of light that traveled up the ceiling and disappeared, evidence of the magic slowly bonding them together as they slept.

They woke the next morning to grey skies, but the rain had stopped. Noah rolled over and squinted up at the clock, "It's almost ten o'clock, I don't think I've slept this late in years," he said, stretching his arms up above his head. "And I don't think I've ever slept that good."

Hailey rolled over on her side and smiled over at him, "Me either," she said. "I could get used to this."

"I hope so," Noah said, pulling her into his arms. "Because I have lots of plans that involve you being in this bed."

"Have you been making plans without me again?" she asked. "You're going to have to stop doing that."

"Really, okay, well, let me share my plans with you," he said, then leaned over and whispered them in her ear, making her blush. "And I was thinking we could get started on the first one right now."

Slightly breathless, her body thinking that was a good idea, she had to take a second to respond, "Connor is going to be home in a couple of hours," she said. "And that is definitely going to take longer than that."

Noah laughed, "Okay, fine, then how about some breakfast instead," he said. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," she said, slipping out of bed and putting on his robe. "I'll start the coffee. We have to figure out what we're going to tell Connor. This might be a little confusing for him."

"He's a smart kid, he'll understand once we explain it to him," Noah said, slipping on a pair of pajama pants. "He likes you, Hailey, he won't be upset."

"I hope not, he's already been hurt enough," she said. "This is going to be a big change for him. We don't want to push him too fast."

"You're right, but we can't pretend this didn't happen," he said, walking over and pulling her into his arms. "I can't go backwards, Hailey."

"Neither can I, and that's the last thing I want," she said, smiling up at him. "We just have to give Connor time to get used to the idea that we're together."

CHAPTER 20



NOAH

Noah snapped his computer closed, then looked over at Hailey standing at the stove making breakfast, “Okay, the pictures are on the way to Joseph,” he said. “He should have them in a few minutes. Did you put the receipts from New York in the envelope?”

Hailey nodded, “I put it over by the back door. I thought we could run it to the post office today,” she said. “I just hope it doesn’t get lost in the mail.”

“We’ll send it overnight,” he said, getting up from the table and walking over to Hailey. “That smells good, I think you’re a better cook than you let on.”

She turned and gave him a kiss, “You haven’t tasted it yet, so you might want to hold off on the compliment,” she said. “I learned most of what I know watching cooking shows. I’m basically just faking it and hoping for the best.”

“Well, it sure does smell good, and I’m more than willing to be your guinea pig,” he said. “Do you want me to check on the biscuits?”

“Oh, no, I almost forgot about them,” she said, dropping the spoon she was using to stir the gravy. “You’re distracting me, mister. Why don’t you be useful and set the table and let me concentrate?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, planting a kiss on the back of her neck. “We can continue this later.”

“The biscuits are going to be burned if you keep this up,” she said, shivering. “Now, move along.”

He laughed, but started setting the table, then sat down and watched her

as she finished making breakfast, letting his mind wander to all the things he could do to her as soon as they were done. When he looked up at the clock and realized it was going to be eating or taking her back upstairs before Connor got home, he abandoned his hunger in favor of the desire thundering through his system.

“Okay, I think that should do it,” Hailey said, setting the scrambled eggs on the table. “Biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, and fresh fruit, not bad for a beginner.”

“It looks wonderful,” he said. “But I’ve suddenly got a craving for something else.”

Hailey let out a squeal when he pulled her into his lap, but didn’t resist his kiss, and before he knew it, the passion that burned between them flared to life. The food sat getting cold on the table, and a car door slammed in front of the house, but neither of them was aware of anything but the pleasure flowing between them, not even the sound of the front door slamming and footsteps heading their way.

“Dad, Tommy’s mom had to bring me home early. The bridge into town is going to flood,” Connor called, his voice full of excitement. “Where are you?”

Before they could untangle themselves, Connor came running into the kitchen, Tommy’s mom right behind him, “Oh, dear.....” the woman said when she saw them. “I knew we should have called first.”

Hailey scrambled off his lap, his robe almost coming open in the process, and he jumped up to stand in front of her until she had it tied securely again. “Oh.....we weren’t expecting you until after lunch,” he said, unable to think of anything else to say. “We were just going to have breakfast. Would you like to join us?”

Tommy’s mother just stared at him for a second, then seemed to recover, “Oh, no thank you, I have to get home,” she said. “The flooding is terrible all over the county. You may not be able to get into town later today.”

“Okay, well, thanks for bringing Connor home,” he said, trying to act normal. “We’ll have to have Tommy and the other boys over soon.”

“Sure, give me a call,” Tommy’s mom said, beginning to look a little amused. “Ummm.....it was good to see you, Hailey.”

Hailey leaned over so she could see around him and waved, “Hi, Barb,” she said, her cheeks bright red. “Be careful going home.”

“I will,” she said. “Take care, Connor, we’ll see you next weekend.”

Connor didn't respond at first, but then he finally looked over at the woman, "Thank you," he said. "I had a good time."

When it was just the three of them in the kitchen, Connor stared at them for a second more, "Dad, what's going on?" he finally asked. "Why is Hailey wearing your robe? What were you doing when I came in?"

Hailey stepped out from behind him, "Connor, your dad and I.....well, we like each other," she said. "And when grown-ups like each other, they....."

He watched the emotions play across his son's face and knew instantly they had a problem, "Connor, this doesn't change anything," he said. "Hailey is still going to take care of you until Maxine comes back, it just means that things are going to be a little different."

"There was nothing wrong with the way things were," Connor said, shaking his head, his face full of anger. "Hailey was supposed to be mine; she was supposed to be here to take care of me, and you took her away from me. Now all she'll want to do is be with you."

Noah could sense his son's magic coming to life, could feel the power pouring off him in waves, and knew he had to calm him down. "Connor, you know Hailey would never treat you that way, she cares about you," he said, taking a step toward him. "She worries about you as much as I do; you'll see this is going to be better than before."

"No, it won't," Connor screamed at him. "She was supposed to be mine, and you took her away. I hate you."

Noah could see that Connor had reached the breaking point, could feel his power filling up the room, but could do nothing to stop what was about to happen. His only hope was to try to get Hailey out of the room and upstairs before he shifted, but only a second later, his adorable son faded away, replaced by a snarling wolf pup. Hailey screamed, grabbed a hold of his arm, then screamed again, her eyes filled with fright and confusion, but he couldn't do anything to help her right then. His angry wolf pup had to be dealt with first.

"Connor, you need to calm down," he said, keeping his voice low and steady. "You'll go back to your human form if you just take a couple of deep breaths and think about it really hard. I know you can do it, son; just give it a try."

Hailey

Hailey froze, a scream trapped in the back of her throat when she realized that Noah was talking to the wolf cub as if it were human, but her brain was too confused and afraid to make the connection. She started to back away, but that only made the wolf howl and snarl as if it was crying, releasing a wave of compassion that washed over her, drowning out the other emotions. Sucking in a deep breath, she looked closer at the wolf, shocked when Connor's frightened eyes looked back at her, and she unconsciously took a couple more steps back.

"It's okay, Hailey, I promise he won't hurt you," Noah said, taking a quick look over his shoulder at her. "He's just scared and upset; it will fade away in just a second if we just give him some space. I'm sorry, I should have told you sooner, I just didn't know how."

She looked over at him, her head spinning, not quite able to believe what was happening, then back at the wolf pup, "I can't.....this isn't possible," she finally stammered, her voice shaking. "This must be a bad dream; it has to be....."

The wolf pup let out a long, low howl filled with so much sadness it made her chest hurt, and she began to feel a little faint, her brain overwhelmed with the effort to believe what she was seeing over what she believed to be reality. Her knees began to get weak, and she grabbed onto the kitchen counter to keep from falling to the floor, then realized that she was hyperventilating. Fighting to take a deep breath, she closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the wolf pup let out one more howl, then ran through the kitchen, slammed into the screen door, knocking it off its hinges, and disappeared into the backyard.

Noah let out a string of curses, then ran over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, "Hailey, I'm sorry, I have to go after him, he's just a kid, this happened way too fast," he said. "Are you going to be okay?"

She shook her head, the effort of trying to speak too much, but she finally managed to get a few words out, "Go after him," she panted. "He needs you."

Noah looked out the back door and then back at her, clearly torn between the two of them, "Go, now," she said, backing away from him. "Just go."

He walked over to her and gave her a kiss, then ran out the back door, calling Connor's name, leaving her standing in the middle of the kitchen, her brain still trying to process what she'd seen. On shaking legs, she walked over to the door and peeked outside, just in time to see Noah disappear and a huge wolf take his place. This time there was no fighting it, she collapsed

onto the floor in a heap and lay there for a long time, trying not to think about anything but breathing, afraid that if she did, she would completely lose her mind.

It was a long time before she finally climbed to her feet and stood looking around the kitchen, still not able to believe what she'd seen, but this time when the urge to look outside welled up inside her, she blocked it. Confused and shaken, she went back upstairs, put on her clothes, packed the few things she had with her, got in her car, and started driving. She had no destination in mind, had no idea where she was going, just that she needed to get away from the house, but only a few minutes later, she found herself parked at the diner.

When she walked in, Ruth took one look at her and came rushing over to her, "Hailey, what's wrong?" she asked. "You look terrible, come back to the office and tell me what happened."

"I can't talk about it, I just need a place to be alone," she stammered, shaking her head, fighting the tears that suddenly appeared in her eyes. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I came here. I wasn't thinking, I'll go."

"No, you won't, come on, let's go upstairs to my apartment," Ruth said, taking her arm and pulling her out of the dining room. "I have a spare bedroom. You can rest there until you're ready to talk."

She managed to hold back the tears until the door closed behind a clearly very worried Ruth, but when they came, the tears didn't stop until she was completely drained and left with only a hollow feeling inside. Crawling under the covers, still in her clothes, she buried her head under the pillows and welcomed the sweet release of sleep, hoping that when she awoke, she'd discover that it had all been a bad dream.

It was dark when the sound of a door closing penetrated through the fog of exhaustion. She opened her eyes, confused about where she was for a second, and then it all came rushing back at her. The wonderful night with Noah, the certainty that she'd found the man she was supposed to love, then the scene in the kitchen, the fear and confusion in Connor's eyes, and finally, the sight of Noah becoming one of the most dangerous predators in the world.

She had to take several deep breaths to steady herself, but when Ruth knocked on the door, she was sitting up in bed, "Come in," she called. "I'm awake."

Ruth poked her head in the door, then pushed it open, "I brought you something to eat," she said, holding up a Styrofoam container. "I thought you

might be hungry, and even if you aren't, you need to eat.”

CHAPTER 21



NOAH

It wasn't hard to find Connor, all he had to do was follow his scent, but as he ran through the trees toward the creek, he realized that he had no idea what to say to his son. He was in uncharted territory, and wished now more than ever that his dad was closer, but he couldn't deny that his parents had earned the right to have some fun, and pushed the thought away. Connor was his responsibility, he would handle the situation, he didn't need to call in backup, even if it would have made everything a lot easier.

He found Connor sitting on a log well away from the rushing water, his face creased with worry and confusion, "Hey, it sure doesn't look much like our little creek right now," he said, sitting down next to him. "Crazy how something can change so quickly and right before our eyes."

Connor let out a long sigh, "I don't know what happened," he said. "I was so angry, and then.....it was scary, and I don't think I ever want to do it again."

He scooted over and put his arm around his son, "I'm sure it was," he said, shaking his head. "And I don't blame you for feeling that way, but the thing is, when it's done right, there's nothing better in this world than shifting, well, almost nothing."

Connor looked up at him, then back down in his lap, "I scared Hailey, Dad, even more than I scared myself," he said, his voice quivering. "She's never going to want to see me again."

"Oh, I don't think that's true," he said, hoping he wasn't lying. "You did scare her, that's true, it kind of scared me too, but she's a smart, intelligent

person, she'll understand. We just have to give her a little time."

Connor sighed again, "I messed everything up," he said. "I'm never going to shift again."

"You didn't mess anything up. If anyone is to blame, it's me," he said. "I should have been honest with Hailey sooner, but I was scared to tell her."

Connor was silent for a second, "You were scared?" he finally asked, looking over at him. "I didn't think you got scared about anything."

He couldn't help but smile, "Son, everyone gets scared, even adults, and that includes me," he said. "There's nothing wrong with being afraid, it's a normal emotion, and sometimes it tells us that we need to step back from a situation, but sometimes it holds us back. In this case, my fear made me hide what we really are from Hailey, and I never should have done that."

"I don't want her to go away," Connor said. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to give her a little space to get used to the idea," his father said. "If Hailey cares about us, it won't matter, and if not, then we're better off without her."

Connor studied him for a second, clearly turning that over in his mind, then let out a long sigh, "I like having her around," he finally said. "I hope that you're right."

"Me too," he said, getting to his feet. "We're just going to have to be patient with her, as difficult as that is."

Connor got up, "Okay, Dad, I'll try," he said. "Can we go home now?"

"You bet," he said, then smiled at his son. "But we're going to do it as wolves."

"No way," Connor said, shaking his head. "I'm never shifting again."

He knelt in front of Connor, "Son, the problem with that plan is that it won't work. If you don't learn how to control the shift, what happened today will happen again," he said. "I promise when you're in control, it's a wonderful experience. I want you to close your eyes and think about being a wolf. It will come naturally when you let it."

Connor closed his eyes, and Noah could feel his magic coming to life, "Oh, it feels like my entire body is tingling," he said. "It feels weird but good, now what do I do?"

"Don't fight it," he said, letting his own magic come to life. "Just let it flow through you, the magic knows what to do."

Only a second later, he was looking at the same wolf pup, but this time instead of fear and confusion, his son's eyes were full of excitement. Connor

let out a little yip, then began running around him, nipping at his heels, and he laughed, then shifted, relief pouring through him. They took off through the woods toward the house, nipping and playing as they went, but when they got back and Connor saw that Hailey's car was gone, some of the fun evaporated from their adventure.

Connor shifted back first, his face full of sadness, "She's gone, Dad," he said with a sigh. "I told you I messed everything up."

"You haven't messed anything up," he said, ruffling his son's hair. "Hailey just needs a little while to get used to the idea. She'll come back, I'm sure of it. Come on, let's go inside. I don't know about you but I'm starving."

At the mention of food, Connor's face lit up, "I am kind of hungry," he said. "Could we make some pancakes?"

"Sure, if that's what you want," he said, dreading going back into the empty house but trying not to show it. "We might even have some chocolate chips to sprinkle on top of them."

"Yes," Connor said, pumping his fist in the air. "I bet I can beat you inside."

He watched his son running toward the back door, took a deep breath to push away the heartache that was slowly creeping over him, but forced himself to smile and ran to catch up with him. Every word he'd said to Connor was the truth, but that didn't mean he wasn't hurting deep inside or fighting a sense of loss that left him feeling devastated; he just couldn't let his son see it.

Hailey

Bright sunshine pouring into the bedroom woke Hailey. Groaning at the intrusion, she tried to roll over and pull the covers over her head, "Oh, no, you don't," Ruth said, ripping the blankets off the bed and dropping them on the floor. "You've been lying up here for two days. It's got to stop. I haven't known you very long, but this isn't like the Hailey I know."

She just groaned again and tried to bury her head under the pillows, "You don't understand," she whined, a little ashamed of herself but unable to throw off the mantle of hurt and confusion that had settled over her. "The worst part is I can't even talk about it."

"I should be upset that you don't trust me enough to tell me what's wrong, but since I think I already figured it out, I understand," Ruth said,

pulling the pillows off her head. “Now you’d better get up and make yourself presentable, you have a visitor.”

A burst of hope shot through her, “Is it Noah?” she asked, sitting up in bed.

Ruth shook her head, “He’s been by here twice a day since you got here, but I’ve been turning him away just like you told me to,” she said, a look of frustration on her face. “But I’m done running interference between you two, so I called someone who might be able to make you see what a fool you’re being.”

“Now, Ruth, that’s not a very nice thing to say, even if it is true,” Mrs. McIntyre said, hobbling into the room. “Hello, my dear, my granddaughter says you’re having a rough time dealing with Noah and Connor being shifters, and she seems to think I can talk some sense into you.”

“Oh.....I.....” she didn’t know what to say, hadn’t expected to hear someone say it out loud. “You know?”

“I’ve lived in Prospect all my life, I knew about shifters long before I met my Harold,” Mrs. McIntyre said, settling herself into a chair. “I know it was a big shock for you, my dear, but that’s no reason to turn your back on the man you love.”

She opened her mouth to say that she didn’t love him, but nothing came out of her mouth except a long sigh. “He’s not the man I thought he was,” she finally said. “He’s..... I don’t know.....”

“More,” Mrs. McIntyre finished for her. “I know you may not see it that way right now, but what you have to understand is that shifters are fiercely protective. They fall deeply in love with their mate and never stray. Once you’re loved by a shifter, you’re loved for the rest of your life.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” she admitted, warmth spreading through her for the first time in days. “I do love him, more than anything, but every time I think about what he can do, my brain gets all jumbled up, and I get scared.”

“What are you scared of?” Mrs. McIntyre asked. “I don’t think it’s Noah or Connor.”

She had to think about that for a second, had to examine the fear that still clung to her, “I don’t know, I don’t think Noah would ever hurt me, and even when Connor was snarling at me, I knew he was as scared as I was,” she said, feeling the fear melting fading, replaced by guilt that she’d run away. “I never should have left, I should have stayed and faced my fear. Instead, I ran away. I have to go talk to them; I have to make this right.”

“Well, then it looks like my job is done,” Mrs. McIntyre said, getting to her feet. “Love is never easy, but when you find something as special as what you and Noah have, it’s worth fighting for. Don’t let fear of what you don’t understand keep you from what’s meant to be. Talk to Noah, I’m sure you can sort this all out.”

As soon as Ruth and her grandmother were gone, she jumped out of bed, got in the shower, got dressed, packed the few things she’d brought, and went downstairs to say goodbye. She found Ruth standing behind the counter, a smile spread across her face when she saw Hailey, and she dropped what she was doing to join her at the end of the counter.

“I made a mistake, I never should have left,” she said, hugging her friend. “I know where I belong now, I just couldn’t see it before. I have to go back.....I have to go home.”

Ruth laughed and pulled back to look at her, a big smile on her face, “I knew Grandma could get through to you,” she said. “I’m happy for you, Hailey, I’m glad that I could help.”

The two women hugged again, “Thank you for putting up with me,” Hailey said. “I guess I should go, I have a lot of apologizing to do.”

To a seven-year-old boy who had just run away from his best friend’s house to beg Hailey to come back, it sounded like she was leaving, and his little heart broke into a million pieces. If it hadn’t been for all the noise in the diner that Saturday morning, they might have heard him begin to cry from his hiding place. If there had been someone watching the front door, they might have seen him slip back out and stopped him. But that didn’t happen. Instead, Connor left the diner alone and began the long hike to the only place he could think of where he couldn’t hurt anyone else, determined to live his life alone.

CHAPTER 22



NOAH

Noah was slumped on the porch in a rocking chair, staring out at the mountains, brooding about all the things he'd done wrong with Hailey, glad that he didn't have to hide his feelings from Connor for a change. It didn't exactly feel good to give in to them, but putting on a brave face for his son was wearing him out, and with each day that passed, he became less and less convinced that Hailey was going to come back to them.

There were a million of other things he should have been doing, but he couldn't make himself move, couldn't let go of the hope that he'd look up and see Hailey's car coming down the drive. Just to prove to himself that he was being a fool, he turned and looked over at the driveway, not quite believing it when he saw the little red car racing toward the house. When it came to a stop and Hailey jumped out, he slowly got to his feet, tempted to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

He met her in the yard, and when she threw herself into his arms, the warmth that flooded his body told him that it was real, Hailey was in his arms, kissing him all over the face. "I'm sorry, Noah, I shouldn't have left," she said. "I made a huge mess of things. I hope you and Connor can forgive me."

"I don't think there's anything to forgive," he said when he managed to untangle himself and look down at her. "I should have told you before we....."

"It doesn't matter," Hailey said. "Well, it does matter, and we definitely need to talk so there aren't any more surprises. Where's Connor? I need to

talk to him, too. I'm sure he's really upset with me. I hope my running away like that didn't hurt him too badly."

"He's with Tommy. They went into Monroe to see that movie all the kids have been talking about," he said, his head spinning with happiness. "He won't be back for a few hours."

"Oh, I was hoping to talk to both of you," she said, the smile faltering just a little. "But I guess that's okay. Maybe it would be better if you and I talk first."

"Hailey, I'm not complaining or anything," he said. "But what happened? This morning you wouldn't see me and now..... What changed?"

"Ruth sicced her grandmother on me, and she talked some sense into me," Hailey said, then sighed. "I was looking at this all wrong, and she was happy to point that out. She said that love doesn't come easily and I'd be a fool to turn my back on it, and she was right. We have something special, Noah, and I'm not going to let anything come between us. I'm sure I still have a lot to learn about shifters, but I'm willing to learn."

"What's all this talk about love, I don't remember you mentioning it before," he said, grinning at her. "Are you trying to tell me that you love me?"

"More than I've ever loved anyone," she said, grinning back at him. "I've loved you since you pulled me out of the river all those years ago."

"I love you too, Hailey," he said, his magic beginning to awaken. "I've loved you since that day, and I'll love you for the rest of our lives."

"You'd better, Noah Russel, because I don't think I can live without you," she said. "Now take me upstairs to our bedroom and make love to me, I've missed you more than I thought possible."

"It's the bond, a connection between us that forms between us because of my magic," he said, swinging her up in his arms, then laughed when he saw the look on her face. "Sorry, you said you didn't want any more surprises."

She laughed, "I guess I did," she said, then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him until neither was thinking about anything but making it to the bedroom.

Noah kicked the bedroom door closed with his foot, then set Hailey down on her feet and turned to flip the lock, "Just in case," he said, turning back to her. "I don't want to be interrupted this time."

Before the words were even out of his mouth, Hailey threw herself into his arms and kissed him while her fingers began working the buttons on his

shirt free. When the last one came loose, she slipped it off his shoulders, then stepped back and, with a hungry look, began to unbutton his jeans. Her hands wrapped around his swollen manhood as soon as it popped free and he could do nothing but stand there and groan with pleasure as she stroked him with her warm hands.

Lost in the sensation, he wasn't prepared when she dropped to her knees in front of him, slid his jeans down, then sucked him into her mouth. The growl of pleasure that came from deep in his chest made the walls shake, and his magic came fully to life, its power channeled not into becoming a wolf, but into the bond between them. When he pulled her back to her feet a few minutes later, he was holding onto his control by a thin thread, the urge to bury himself into her hot, wet heat almost overwhelming.

"You drive me crazy," he growled, grabbing her shirt and ripping it off, ignoring the buttons that flew across the room. "I need to get my hands on you now."

The scrap of lace covering her breasts was no barrier, and it was lying on the floor with her shirt a second later; then with a growl, he lifted her off her feet and threw her down onto the bed. He stripped off her pants, threw them aside, then hooked his finger into her panties and yanked them off, then stood over her, hands on his hips, letting his eyes roam over her body for a second. Chest heaving, Hailey looked up at him, her eyes full of passion, then stretched her arms up over her head and spread her legs for him.

He felt her complete surrender, knew that she was his to do with as he pleased, and slid between her parted legs, dipped his head, and with a long swipe of his tongue, sent her flying. She gasped his name with surprise, then began to moan as he worked his tongue over her swollen nib until crying out his name again. She tumbled over the edge, her body bucking and trembling.

When she finally lay still, he slowly kissed his way back up her body until she was writhing under him again, "Please, Noah, I can't wait any longer," she cried. "Take me now."

Unable to hold back any longer, he spread her legs wider, locked his eyes on her, and drove himself into her, then waited only long enough to feel her lift her hips to him before burying himself deeply again. Hailey cried out with pleasure, his entire body filled with warmth, unleashing the animal inside him, the world melted away, and he was aware only of the woman beneath him and the love wrapping around them with its own special spell.

When they finally tumbled over the edge together, he emptied himself

inside of Hailey just as she cried out his name, and together, they floated on a cloud of sensation. They finally came back down to Earth, tangled together in the sheets, Noah still buried deeply inside Hailey. They lay there for a long time, neither ready to break the connection between them. He finally rolled off her when the clock began to chime the hour, kissed her until she was breathless, then held her for a few minutes longer, afraid to let her go.

“We need to go get Connor,” she finally said. “He and I need to have a long talk; I just hope he can forgive me.”

“He’s going to be so happy to see you, he’ll forget all about it,” he said, giving her one more kiss. “He knows how lucky we are to have you.”

Hailey

“What do you mean he’s not here?” Noah demanded his voice rising with every word. “Where is he?”

“He told me that you were picking him up because there was an emergency,” Barb said, her face slowly turning pale. “I remember him telling me that you were here, but I was so busy getting the rest of the kids ready to go to the movies I let him leave without walking him to the door. I’m so sorry, Noah, I can’t imagine where he went.....this is so unlike him, he’s usually the best behaved of all the boys, I never thought.....”

Just then, Tommy came up behind his mother, “Mom, I know where he went. He made me promise not to tell,” he said. “But I’m worried about him too.”

Noah knelt down, “Where did he go, Tommy?” he asked. “Connor will forgive you for telling us, you know that.”

Tommy looked up at Hailey, “He went to the diner to talk to you,” he said. “He wouldn’t tell me why it was so important, but he looked really sad.”

“Thanks, Tommy, that helps,” he said. “We’ll find him, I promise.”

They raced away from the house, Barb and Tommy watching from the door. When they arrived, they parked in the middle of street in front of the diner, and ran inside. Ruth was surprised to see them, but they cut off her greeting, “Connor is missing, and we think he might have come here,” she said. “Have you seen him?”

Ruth shook her head, “No, I haven’t, but I’ve been upstairs most of the afternoon,” she said, looking around the diner. “Stephanie has been here all day, let’s ask her.”

“You know, now that you mention it, there was a little boy in here earlier this afternoon,” Stephanie answered when they asked her. “I was taking care of a big table, but I saw him standing over there. I thought he was with Hailey at first, but then he left. I think he was crying.”

She was confused for a second, “He was standing next to me?”

“You were talking to Ruth, then you hugged her and went back upstairs,” Stephanie said. “That’s when the little boy left.”

They all stood there in silence for a few seconds, then Ruth gasped, “Hailey, you were talking about going home, about going back,” she said. “You don’t think…….”

“He must have thought I meant I was leaving,” she said, grabbing Noah’s arm. “He must be devastated, and I bet he blames himself. Where would he go?”

Noah didn’t say anything for a long time, and she could see him struggling not to panic, “Okay, just let me think,” he finally said, taking a couple of deep breaths, then a smile appeared on his face. “The cave, I bet he went to the cave.”

They were running out of the diner before Ruth could even ask about the cave, jumped into the truck, and tore out of town toward the road that led into the mountains. “I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to him,” she said, fighting back the tears that stung her eyes. “This is all my fault; I shouldn’t have run away.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Noah said, taking her hand. “This isn’t your fault; I don’t want to hear you blaming yourself. Besides, I’m sure he’s fine, he’s a wolf shifter, we’re pretty tough.”

They were out of the truck before the engine died and running up the trail that led to the lake, “What if he’s not there?” she asked. “Where else could he be if we’re wrong?”

Noah didn’t answer right away, and she began to get nervous, but when they topped the rise that led down into the little clearing, it felt like her heart stopped when she saw the little boy sitting by the lake. Relief pounded through her, and for a second, she just stood there staring at him, then she pushed her way past Noah and swept the child up into her arms.

“Oh my God, you have no idea how happy we are to see you,” she said, hugging him. “You scared us, young man. I’m sorry I ran away, I just got scared, but if you can forgive me, I promise never to do that again.”

“But you said that you were leaving,” Connor said, his bottom lips

trembling. “You said you were going home.”

She hugged him again, “I meant home to you and your dad,” she said. “That’s my home now…… if you’ll have me, that is.”

Connor looked over at Noah, who smiled at him, “It’s up to you now, Son,” he said, walking over to them. “Do you want Hailey to come live with us?”

“Really?” he asked, looking over at her. “Are you going to be my new mom?”

She smiled down at him, “Only if you want me to be,” she said. “And you don’t have to decide now. Take some time to think about it.”

“I don’t have to think about it,” Connor said, giving her a big hug. “Can I call you Mom?”

“You bet, now I think it’s time we all went home,” she said, holding her hand out to Noah. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“But not tonight,” Noah said, wrapping his arms around them. “Tonight, we’re going to celebrate.”

“I want pizza,” Connor said, then grinned at her. “Mom, tell Dad I want pizza.”

She laughed, “I’ll see what I can do,” she said. “Now come on, let’s get off this mountain.”

Connor ran on ahead, but Noah held her back, “I never dreamed I could be this happy,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “I love you, Hailey, now and forever.”

“I love you too, Noah,” she said, resting her head on his chest for a second, then looked up at him. “And I will until the end of time.”

EPILOGUE



Grayson pushed the pink stroller, a gift from his mother, down the street, wondering if he'd ever get used to the looks that he got, then spotted Noah and Hailey standing in front of the diner. Glancing down at the sleeping baby, he wondered if he dared stop and talk to his friend, then desperate for some adult conversation, wheeled the carriage across the street. It wasn't until he got closer that he noticed how serious their faces looked, and he wondered if someone had died and debated changing direction, not in the mood for any sadness.

Before he could slip away, a line of black cars came down Main Street, driving slower than necessary, "What's going on?" he asked. "What's with all the scary-looking cars?"

Hailey looked over at him, "That's just my father being taken away by the FBI," she said. "He's finally going to get what he deserves."

"Wow, that's....." he trailed off, not sure what to say.

Just then, Ivy decided that she was done with her nap and began to fuss. Only seconds later, her face scrunched up in that way he was becoming familiar with. "Oh, no," he said, trying to get to her before she exploded, but it didn't work, and she was wailing within seconds. "Now, it will be impossible to get her to stop."

He stood on the sidewalk, staring at his daughter for a second, then started to reach for her, but a woman pushed him out of the way. "What's the matter, angel?" the woman asked, picking up the baby. "Are you having a bad day?"

Ivy, surprised to have suddenly been picked up by the woman, stopped crying and stared at her, “Well, now that’s better,” she said. “You just wanted someone to pick you up.”

“Excuse me,” he said, taking Ivy out of the woman’s arms. “You don’t just go around picking up people’s kids, lady; that will get you arrested.”

The woman studied him, “I’ve been arrested for worse,” she said, grinning at him, making his stomach do funny things. “Besides, I wasn’t going anywhere with her, and I did make her stop crying.”

“Quinn, are you causing trouble?” Jayce asked, running up to them. “I swear you’re worse than the girls. Oh, hi, Grayson, I didn’t see you there. Have you met my sister? She’s staying with me for the rest of the summer, maybe longer.”

I hope you enjoyed the book! Want to read more of this series? [**CLICK HERE**](#) to get book 5 “[**Daddy Wolf’s Feisty Nanny**](#)”.